Communication, Politics, and Society: The Case of Popular Media in Quebec

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To understand Quebec, sociologists and political scientists have traditionally referred to notions such as development, dependency, cultural division of labour, class relations, and national consciousness (see, for example, McRoberts and Posgate, 1980). I would add to these the notion of communication. As much as by anything else, Quebec is distinguished by the particular relationship of communication to social and political life. In one sense, all Quebec media have a certain emancipatory component, to the extent that they aid and abet Quebec’s cultural resistance to the centrifugal forces of the great North American melting pot. At the same time, this very quality makes Quebec media an agent of fragmentation within the national entity known as Canada.

Even presuming the maintenance of a distinctive society in Quebec, there is still a continuous struggle to define what that society is and will be, and media have been decidedly a part of that struggle as well.

Media were first introduced to Quebec by American revolutionaries seeking to extend their influence by striking at the weak spot of British North America in the years following the Declaration of Independence. French Canada’s first newspaper publisher, Fleury Mesplet, was set up in business by none other than Benjamin Franklin — although British government contracts kept him there. The relationship between media and the state in Quebec as well as the U.S. connection (see Lamonde, 1984) is thus older than the political structure of Canadian confederation, which dates only from 1867.

Quebec’s mainstream media have historically exhibited a certain ambivalence with respect to their place in North America, not unlike that of Quebec society on the whole. Quebec’s mass-circulation daily newspapers, for example, have generally been among the most grey, most conservative, and least independent on the continent. On the other hand there has always been a European-style daily press of opinion, which continues unto this day.
Radio and television have contributed to breaking down the barriers of isolation, at the same time as they have helped maintain the indigenous culture. In the 1950s, when television was new and there was only one station available to francophone Québécois, the weekly soap opera *The Plouffe Family* was watched regularly in up to 85 per cent of households. At another level, jurisdiction over broadcasting has been a constitutional and political issue in Canada as long as there has been broadcasting. The federal government has exclusive jurisdiction over broadcasting in Canada, but every Quebec government since 1929 has claimed a stake in broadcasting and argued for a larger provincial role (see Raboy, 1986a).

In his classic study of Canadian society, *The Vertical Mosaic*, sociologist John Porter (1965) noted the preponderance of “intellectual journalists” in articulating the values of change in Quebec society. The same is true of Quebec political life. In 1980, when Quebec voted in a historic referendum on the future of its place in Canada, the political leaders of both sides, René Lévesque and Claude Ryan, were former prominent journalists who had given up influential careers to enter active politics.

The focus of this chapter is not on the general place of media in Quebec, however, but on a particular set of experiences with popular uses of media. Distinctive in North America because of its main language, religion, class structure, and social history, Quebec in the past thirty years has been the setting for some unique examples of social and political uses of media. Taken together, these uses of media provide important insights into the limits and possibilities of democratic media, including:

- the criticism of mainstream media from a perspective of popular movements;
- the challenge to ideological hegemony and the logic of the marketplace from within mainstream media, in the form of struggles involving journalists and other media workers;
- the attempts to create autonomous alternatives to mainstream media;
- direct action aimed at appropriating space in the media;
- strategies to gain access to media by achieving newsworthiness;
- popular intervention to influence the mandate of state media apparatuses and state policies with regard to media.

All of these elements have been present in Quebec at one time or another since 1960, and they have cumulatively resulted in creating a distinctive media culture and a situation in which media are considered as part of the normal terrain of social struggle.¹

**Media and Quebec’s Quiet Revolution**

Quebec society in the 1940s and 1950s was dominated by a clerical conservative ideology embodied in the ruling political party, the Union Nationale, which had first been elected in 1936. The election of a reform government in June 1960 signalled the opening of a new era that has come to be known as the “Quiet Revolution.”
The hallmark of the Quiet Revolution was a series of structural reforms and social innovations rooted in the modernization of the Quebec state and appended institutions, such as the education and social services system. For the most part, Quebec's mainstream media, especially the daily press, actively supported the reform movement, and the media themselves underwent considerable upheaval during the early part of the decade. In fact, major labour conflicts at Montreal's largest newspaper, *La Presse* (1958), and at Radio-Canada (1958-59) actually preceeded the 1960 elections, heralding the broader social changes to come. In the early 1960s, media were thus seen as responsible social institutions playing an important role in the prevailing consensus in favour of social change, and the media generally agreed to play such a role (Benjamin, 1979).

As early as 1963, disillusionment began to set in about the degree and extent of the reforms. New and radical forms of social and political opposition began to emerge in the way of violent attacks on symbols of anglo-colonial domination, the organization of citizens committees around radical reformist demands in inner cities, and an increase in labour militancy, especially in the newly organized public sector.

The cracks in the consensus were most clearly evident in events surrounding *La Presse*. The newspaper was closely tied to the ruling Liberal Party and had been a staunch supporter of the reform phase of the Quiet Revolution, investing staff and resources in popularizing the government reforms for its mass readership. In 1961 it had hired a former labour movement journalist and outspoken critic of the previous regime, Gérard Pelletier, as its editor-in-chief, and Pelletier had stocked his newsroom with young, free-spirited college graduates, many of them with close ties to the emerging opposition movements.

As social agitation heightened, so did tensions between the *La Presse* journalists and the paper’s board of directors. Pelletier sat on the fence, torn between a genuine liberal commitment to a socially responsible press and the inevitability of the rights of ownership. When *La Presse* typesetters affiliated with the International Typographers' Union went on strike in September 1964, the newspaper immediately locked out the reporters. The paper remained closed down for seven months.

The *La Presse* conflict of 1964-65 has often been cited as the signal of the end of the Quiet Revolution. It was certainly a watershed as far as public perception of the mainstream media was concerned. Before the newspaper returned to publishing, Gérard Pelletier was fired as editor (he went on to enter federal politics at the side of Pierre Trudeau, for whom he served as minister of communications and later ambassador to Paris and the United Nations). Many of the dynamic elements of the reporting staff left mainstream journalism, and a new tabloid competitor was launched on the Montreal market (*Le Journal de Montréal*, now the highest circulation daily in Quebec). The struggle around *La Presse* was a symbol of the new social conflict in Quebec, and when it was over the mainstream media by extension were considered in the camp of the political status quo (Godin, 1972).

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, labour conflicts in the media paralleled social conflicts in the surrounding society, and media workers' unions would gener-
ally identify with opposition social groups. Media owners and managers were
camped on the other side, the side of power, and the lines were clearly drawn.

This critical perception of the place of the media was further heightened by
changes in the political economy of Quebec media. Public opinion in Quebec was
alerted to the problem of concentration of media ownership in 1967 when La
Presse was sold to a conglomerate that already owned three smaller dailies. In 1969
and again in 1972, public pressure prompted the Quebec National Assembly to
convene a special parliamentary commission on freedom of the press. Through-
out the 1970s and 1980s, journalists and public-interest groups regularly spoke out
against ever-increasing concentration in the press and broadcast media. But while
journalists’ unions and their professional associations pressed for legal controls on
the concentration of ownership, union and popular movement leaders also called
for the creation of autonomous media outside the control of capital or the state.²

Alternative Media
Small but influential radical journals had played an important part in the genesis of
the Quiet Revolution. The most famous of these prior to 1960 was Cité libre, which
had numbered among its editors the future prime minister of Canada, Pierre
Trudeau, the journalist Gérard Pelletier, and, briefly, the revolutionary nationalist
Pierre Vallières (author of the anti-colonialist classic White Niggers of America).

In 1963 a new political journal called Parti pris appeared, moving the level of
intellectual social criticism in Quebec sharply to the left. Describing itself as “pro-
independence, socialist, and anti-clerical,” it was the first intellectual rallying
point of left-wing nationalism in Quebec. In its pages the concerns of the interna-
tional youth movement of the 1960s were linked with the specific Québécois de-
mands of socialism and national independence.

Parti pris represented a rupture with the Cité libre generation of anti-nationalist,
Catholic progressives. It soon spawned other journals of the left, ranging from
the militant and action-oriented Mobilisation to the more scholarly and academic
Socialisme. Both types left their mark on Quebec’s political culture, the first in the
form of agitation and propaganda vehicles for various action groups, the second in
a particular Québécois brand of Marxist sociography.

Parti pris itself published until 1968, when it collapsed under the weight of a
political split characteristic of sixties politics in Quebec: the question of whether or
not to support the new Parti Québécois formed by a coalition of defectors from the
Quiet Revolution’s Liberal Party and electorally inclined supporters of Quebec in-
dependence. Some Parti pris veterans eventually served as “organic intellectuals”
of the PQ after it took power in 1976, while others went into the labour movement,
the extraparliamentary nationalist movement, and organizations of the extreme left.

The political situation was further polarized in 1966, with the electoral defeat
of the Liberals and the return to power of the Union Nationale. Not beholden to
the progressive coalition that had elected the Liberals, the government moved
strongly against the labour movement, charged nationalist spokesmen with sedi-
tious conspiracy, and generally sought to demonstrate to Quebec's traditional elites that all change can be reversed. The resulting increase in radical militancy had a further impact on communications.

From 1967 on, dozens of "community newspapers" appeared in working-class neighbourhoods of Quebec cities, as well as in rural areas. In 1968 the president of the Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN), Marcel Pepin, in a historic document called _Le Deuxième front_ (The Second Front), denounced Quebec's commercial media for placing profit above the public interest and called on the union movement and its supporters to create independent vehicles for "people's" or "popular" information. By 1969 a co-operative formed by a coalition of labour and community groups had begun publishing a left-wing weekly newspaper, _Québec-Presse_, and several smaller-scale initiatives had sprung up as well. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the ideologies of radical nationalism, socialism, and community action were interlaced in dozens of media experiences, usually linked loosely or organically to oppositional social and political groups but free of ties to either capitalist or state interests.

_Québec-Presse_ combined a philosophy of alternative information with a democratic structure and provided an unprecedented degree of autonomy for its editorial staff, which was recruited on the basis of both politics and professionalism. Billed as "popular response to cultural domination," the paper was the first attempt by opposition groups to penetrate the mass market. While it published for five years, constituting an important pole of solidarity for a generation of social activists, _Québec-Presse_ was never free of financial crisis. One of the legacies of the experience was the understanding of the limits of establishing self-sufficient autonomous media in a small market. With a weekly circulation of about thirty-five thousand, _Québec-Presse_ could not survive after the union federations pulled the plug on it in 1974. But while it published, the paper played an indispensable role in the evolution of Quebec's social movements. These were years of crisis, and _Québec-Presse_ was a journal of record, vehicle of mobilization, and cultural unifier.

A second large-scale autonomous media operation of the period was the Agence presse libre du Québec (APLQ). Like many of the media projects of the period, its creators included former students and disaffected young professionals. As a news agency, the APLQ had minimal production costs and was therefore less fraught with financial problems than a journal like _Québec-Presse_. In 1971 it began providing a weekly information package to subscribing activist groups. It addressed "collectivities" rather than individuals, and sought to establish a two-way communication network by soliciting news from its subscribers. In a context where mainstream media were highly centralized in a few cities and generally inaccessible to movement groups, the agency successfully linked several hundred disparate groups around Quebec and provided them with a means of communication. This project self-destructed in 1976 in a period of ultra-left radicalization marked by the "liquidation" of dozens of projects deemed to be politically unsound (see _Mobilisation_, 1976).
The late 1960s and early 1970s thus provided a rich range of alternative press experiences, each with its own legacy. In general, these projects showed the difficulty both of sustaining financially ambitious projects in a limited market and of placing a communications undertaking in the direct service of a political project, rather than allowing it to serve the general interests of a movement while retaining editorial and organizational autonomy.

**Direct Action**
Aside from a critical approach to mainstream media manifesting itself in the militant actions of media workers, and along with the attempts to create autonomous media, the early 1970s also provided examples of direct attempts by activists to take media into their own hands. The occasions were the two major social upheavals of the period, the so-called “October crisis” of 1970 and the general strike in the public sector in 1972.

The October crisis refers to the suspension of civil liberties and occupation of Quebec by the Canadian army following the kidnapping by radical nationalists of the British trade commissioner and a provincial cabinet minister in October 1970. The crisis has been described by some analysts (for example, Latouche, 1975) as a struggle over the means of communications, because in the early stages the kidnappers of the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) and the authorities both used mainstream media to muster public support. As one contemporary commentator put it, official information was caught in its own trap, as the FLQ successfully manipulated institutional news values to keep the upper hand (“B.R., Journalist,” 1971). Unquestionably, the high point of the adventure from the FLQ’s point of view was the broadcasting of its manifesto on national television by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation – the only one of its demands to be fully granted. The manifesto hit a responsive public chord, as for the first time a radical critique of Quebec society was made directly to its intended audience.

The 1972 events were a different version of the same phenomenon: the direct appropriation of the means of mass communication by social activists in time of crisis. This time, however, the protagonists were union members at the base of the labour movement, and their target was local broadcasting outlets. During a province-wide general strike called to protest unsatisfactory contract negotiations in the public sector, dozens of unionists in some twenty cities and towns around Quebec occupied local radio and television stations for periods ranging from a few minutes to several days, broadcasting their own version of events and trying their hands at cultural programming as well.

In general the events of 1970 and 1972 contributed to popular consciousness about media in Quebec and gave activists a taste for direct involvement.

**Challenges from Within**
If labour conflicts in the Quebec media had been a common feature of the political context since the late 1950s, increasingly in the 1960s and 1970s the conflicts
were marked by the links that media workers made between their working conditions, control of production, and the nature of their product.

Quebec journalists considered themselves actively involved in the reform movement of the early 1960s. As public attitudes towards the reforms turned critical, militancy among journalists increased. By the late 1960s, most French-language print and electronic journalists in Quebec were unionized with the CSN—the independent, combative union federation that had issued the “second front” call in 1968. As social agitation in Quebec grew, so did the journalists’ determination not to be used as mere transmission agents for the elites who controlled both private and public media institutions. In 1969 this concern crystallized in the creation of the FPJQ (Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec), a professional organization that would become the main agitator for “the public’s right to information” in the 1970s.

Quebec journalists were among the direct targets of police and legal repression in the October crisis of 1970, being subjected to various forms of police and employer harassment. More than a dozen journalists were arrested and detained for varying lengths of time, and several were fired or removed from sensitive positions for criticizing their employers’ coverage of the crisis (see Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec, 1971).

Journalists carried on a sort of newsroom guerrilla warfare campaign in the mainstream press through the 1970s. Again, La Presse was a major site of confrontation. In October 1971 the newspaper shut down, sparking massive demonstrations of support for the journalists and their critique of the paper’s news policy. The union, meanwhile, published a self-managed daily newspaper called Le Quotidien Populaire (People’s Daily).

In 1972, unions of journalists and other communication workers formed the FNC (Fédération nationale des communications), affiliated with the CSN. In subsequent years, both the FNC and FPJQ published widely and organized around social issues related to media and information, despite important rivalries between professionally oriented and primarily syndicalist factions among them.

Interestingly, journalists were one of the rare professional groups to continue militant union activity in the relative social calm that accompanied the election of the Parti Québécois in 1976. In 1977-78, an unprecedented wave of strikes in the media paralysed La Presse yet again, as well as Quebec City’s Le Soleil, the private radio network Radiomutuel, the provincial public-educational television network Radio-Québec, the dailies Montréal-Matin and The Montreal Star (which did not survive the conflicts). At La Presse and Le Soleil, professional clauses relating to journalists’ control over the integrity of their stories were at the root of the conflict. In 1980-81, long strikes shut down the newsroom of Radio-Canada and the daily Le Devoir (whose journalists had won creation of a joint worker-management news policy committee following a previous conflict in 1975).

Thus, the mainstream media have been at the heart of social conflict and conflict surrounding media in Quebec.
Propaganda, Politics, and Communication

In addition to the role of mainstream media, alternative media, struggles involving media workers, and direct action on media, we must consider the media strategies of radical and reformist political groups. These were basically of three sorts.

To a greater extent than the rest of North America, Quebec was marked by a proliferation of extreme left parties and groups in the early 1970s. Generally, these movements took a Leninist view of communication as political propaganda, and they created their own media (usually newspapers or magazines). Under their influence, many of the autonomous projects of the earlier period, such as the APLQ, were either transformed into propaganda vehicles, or, more often, were "liquidated." This current was characterized by the conscious subordination of ideological and cultural activity to a political line.

The second type of political communication involved a specific experience of the Parti Québécois. In provincial elections in 1973 the PQ received about 30 percent of the popular vote but only 6 out of 110 seats in the Quebec National Assembly. The PQ leadership decided to compensate for its lack of a parliamentary platform by launching a daily newspaper, Le Jour, openly committed to Quebec independence and a general program of social democracy. The newspaper began publishing in February 1974 and attracted many professional journalists and a readership equal to that of the critical (but federalist) intellectual daily, Le Devoir. Le Jour published for two years, in spite of serious advertiser boycotts, but experienced a spiralling series of conflicts between its staff and party leaders over editorial and management policy. The newspaper was shut down less than three months before the November 1976 election that brought the PQ to power.

Meanwhile, between these currents of neo-Bolshevism and social democracy, new movements began to emerge around social issues such as feminism, ecology, sexuality, and urban life (see Raboy, 1986b). In some cases these movements spun off interesting alternative publications, but the most important political challenges to established authority have relied on traditional communication strategies involving public relations and the use of mainstream media to get messages across. The most striking example of this was the case of the Montreal Citizens' Movement, a municipal party formed in 1974, whose electoral fortunes rose and fell in waves of media approval and disapproval until it took power at city hall in 1986. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, several important periodicals with loose ties to popular movements came and went (Le Temps fou, 1978-82; Presse libre, 1981-82). The most durable were those that could rely on support rooted in political conviction (such as the feminist La Vie en Rose, 1981-87 and the union-based Mouvements, 1983-87). At the same time, a number of serious attempts to launch new non-sectarian media of the left have floundered due to a lack of institutional support: The union federations, for example, have been reluctant to participate in any project involving a coalition of popular groups, preferring to rely on internal means of communication to reach their members and on massive advertising campaigns in the mainstream media to communicate with the public.
State Intervention and Popular Participation

While opposition movements in Quebec focused their attention on the locations of power, one of those locations, the Quebec state, was engaged in a power struggle of its own.

In 1968 Canada adopted a new Broadcasting Act, stating, among many other things, that "facilities should be provided within the Canadian broadcasting system for educational broadcasting" (Canada, 1968: s.2(ii)). The federal government proposed to create a new agency that would provide facilities to each province, and each province would in turn control production and programming within its own territory.

Every Quebec government since 1929 had asserted the province's claim on broadcasting. The conservative nationalist premier, Maurice Duplessis, went so far as to enact legislation in 1945 enabling the province to set up a radio network but, under threat from Ottawa, Quebec did not execute the law.

A Canadian Supreme Court judgment of 1931 had given exclusive jurisdiction over broadcasting to the federal government, but Quebec saw a loophole: constitutionally, the provinces had clear control of education — so which level of government could then claim authority over "educational broadcasting"?

Reaction to the federal proposal in Quebec ranged from scepticism to outrage. Forty years earlier, a federal royal commission (Canada, 1929) had proposed a similar formula for all of public broadcasting, only to have the plan rejected in favour of a central organization, which became the CBC.

In 1967, Quebec began experimenting with an educational television project known as TEVEC, through which broadcasts were prepared by the Department of Education and broadcast in time purchased from CBC or private stations. Ontario had announced similar intentions, and its Department of Education would soon be broadcasting over a UHF frequency licenced to the CBC. But Ottawa's proposal to furnish an infrastructure for educational broadcasting was about to be rejected out of hand by Quebec.

During intensive constitutional negotiations between Ottawa and the provinces in February 1968, the Quebec government claimed authority over educational broadcasting by virtue of its exclusive powers in education. Quebec then announced its intention to create an educational broadcasting organization to be known as Radio-Québec.

Both Ottawa and Quebec introduced educational broadcasting legislation in March 1969 (around the same time as both governments were in the process of creating cabinet-level departments of communications). But it was Ottawa that backed down from a constitutional (and political) showdown over broadcasting, and its proposed bill creating a Canadian Educational Broadcasting Authority was withdrawn in November 1969, just as the Radio-Québec legislation was taking effect.

Radio-Québec had been actually operating for about a year by this time and was well into production. The law enabled it to own broadcasting facilities as well as produce programs. For the first time within the framework of Canadian federal-
provincial relations in communications, a province would have its own broadcasting service.

In the Quebec National Assembly, the Liberal opposition supported Quebec’s constitutional right to jurisdiction over educational broadcasting and acknowledged the historic importance of the legislation, but the Liberals also made a vigorous and lengthy critique of the proposed composition and operation of Radio-Québec. Liberal communications critic Yves Michaud (later editor of Le Jour), an outspoken advocate of the freedom and responsibility of the press, attacked the close relationship between the government and Radio-Québec that the legislation provided. Michaud called instead for an independent agency.

So while the government’s constitutional position on broadcasting could be the basis of a political consensus, there was a wide divergence of opinion concerning the form of the Radio-Québec project, particularly with respect to the Quebec state. In 1969, Quebec’s Union Nationale government was perceived in liberal and progressive circles as repressive, if not reactionary, with respect to civil liberties and traditional North American notions of freedom.

Indeed, the debate over Radio-Québec highlighted many of the evident contradictions inherent in asserting “national sovereignty” in communications. Having built a consensus and affirmed its right to national autonomy over the means of cultural production (as, for example, Canada had done vis-à-vis the United States), the Quebec government viewed those means as an effective extension of itself. Critics outside the government saw the issue in terms of the ideal potential of broadcasting and the proper relationship between media, the state, and the public, while the representatives of the Quebec state reduced the question to one of national interest.

But even after Ottawa withdrew from educational broadcasting, provincial agencies were still barred from holding broadcasting licences until 1972. Quebec therefore began by transmitting programs over closed-circuit cable systems. When Radio-Québec received approval to operate broadcasting transmitters in Montreal and Quebec City in 1974, Quebec communications minister Jean-Paul L’Allier announced that Radio-Québec would not be an ivory tower in which programs were conceived at the top and merely transmitted to a receiving public. Quebec educational television would be more than a mere means of intellectual exchange. Mechanisms to ensure public participation would be worked out.

But even at this early stage a gap was appearing between the promise of Radio-Québec and its actual performance. A crippling four-month labour conflict in 1973-74 revealed Radio-Québec to be a bureaucratic organization, characterized by hierarchical functioning and self-censorship on the part of creative personnel. By the time Radio-Québec began broadcasting on its own UHF frequency in January 1975, it was already under public fire for failing to meet expectations for truly different television programming. Later that year, public hearings on Radio-Québec’s programming and development demonstrated a strong public demand for a democratic, decentralized educational network, with a strong regional thrust (see Institut canadien d’éducation des adultes, 1974, 1975).
Under the Parti Québécois government (1976-85), Radio-Québec expanded and came to occupy an important place in the francophone-Quebec television spectrum. Following a further study of its own, the PQ decided to restructure Radio-Québec along the lines recommended by the public hearings, and in 1979 a new law created a series of nine regional committees composed of community representatives to make programming and policy decisions. At the same time, Radio-Québec’s central board of directors was expanded from seven to twenty-one members to include regional representation.

From 1980-85 Radio-Québec’s regional production tripled (while overall production increased by only 30 per cent). A government study in 1985 reported that people in areas served by Radio-Québec regional production offices considered the provincial broadcaster “their” television (Canada/Quebec, 1985). Yet regional programming never received more than about 15 per cent of the Radio-Québec budget.

The PQ government never made full use of the cultural apparatus at its disposal to advance the cause of Quebec independence. In 1980 it organized a referendum seeking a mandate to negotiate a new political arrangement with Ottawa (enigmatically known as “sovereignty-association”). When that failed, it made a fundamental shift from politics towards economics as the lever for Quebec’s self-determination, and by 1982-83 – along with most governments in the Western world – it was treating communications as a sector of economic and industrial rather than sociocultural development (Quebec, 1982, 1983). Soon, Radio-Québec was being redefined as a more traditional television network (see Société de radio-télévision du Québec, 1985). Advertising was introduced, and there was talk of privatization.

When the Liberals were re-elected in December 1985, they immediately cut $8 million of the network’s $60 million budget by dismantling the regional decision-making structures and closing down most of the regional production facilities. In March 1987 a Quebec ministry of communications report recommended that Radio-Québec could still serve a useful purpose; as a springboard for launching Quebec cultural industries into the international francophone market; and as a foothold from which Quebec could demand a role in establishing Canadian communications policy (Quebec, 1987).

Thus a media that began as a vehicle of cultural sovereignty and became an instrument of social development took on an increasingly economic function in the late 1980s. Educational broadcasting, repatriated to Quebec, was a major terrain of struggle over democratization during the 1970s. While the Quebec state proved in the end to be no more receptive to the democratic impulse, the fact that it was closer to the people made it an easier object of social action.  

**Community Broadcasting**

Finally, the combination of state and popular interests spawned a further distinctive media practice in Quebec: community broadcasting.
The introduction of community broadcasting in Quebec has to be seen in the context of the general approach to state intervention that characterized the Quiet Revolution – an approach distinguished by the widespread use of community organizers (known as “social animators”) to involve local communities in planning their own economic and social development. Following a pilot project in a depressed area of eastern Quebec, the Quebec government (or rather, its technocrats) adopted community “participation” in health care, social services, and education as an ideological value (see Godbout, 1987).

In 1967 the ministry of education launched a program known as TEVEC (état-vé communalitaire, or community television) in the Lake St. John region north of Quebec City, in which social animation techniques were employed to get the community to participate in producing adult education material aired during time purchased from local television stations. Quebec went on to experiment with other methods of “de-schooling” education in the 1970s, but an important germ had been unleashed, in Lake St. John at least, as people got a taste of direct, local involvement in producing television content. In 1970, the first community to become involved in cable-supported “community television” was in the small town of Normandin, in Lake St. John.

A federal program know as Challenge for Change (or Société nouvelle) was also instrumental in the origins of Quebec community media. Set up in 1967 (1969 on the French side), Challenge for Change was designed to use communications to promote new ideas and provoke social change in the “fight against poverty.” The Normandin project was directly aided by Challenge for Change.

When they were not already integral parts of government programs (as in the case of TEVEC and Challenge for Change), community media were often financed by short-term grants from two federal government programs set up in the early 1970s: Opportunities for Youth and Local Initiatives Projects. In 1973 the Quebec government, through its Ministry of Communications, began providing regular funding of community radio, television, and newspapers through a special program of aid to community media (PAMEC). Quebec has tended to see support for community media (and educational broadcasting) as a way to capture some of the broadcasting space constitutionally occupied by Ottawa. It has been the only Canadian province to directly support community media over an extended period (see Canada, 1986, ch.19).

Community broadcasting’s link with the state has been the subject of vigorous polemical discussion in Quebec (see, for example, Council for the Development of Community Media, 1977). The early community media of the 1960s were criticized for failing to live up to their initial promise of interactivity and for becoming limited, small-scale versions of mass media. Interestingly, the first attempts to create alternative electronic media in the late 1960s and early 1970s did not designate themselves as community broadcasters. Montreal’s Radio Centreville, for example, initially called itself a “neighbourhood radio” (radio de quartier) and a “people’s radio” (radio populaire), only adopting the community label later to qualify for state support.
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Some community media grew out of and maintained ties with activist groups in the “popular movement.” With the general demobilization and retreat from left-wing militancy of the late 1970s and early 1980s, certain community broadcasting operations emerged as focal points for popular intervention, as well as providing information alternatives in a context of increasing concentration and uniformity in the mainstream media.

In many cases, despite the constraints imposed by government purse-strings, community media were working models of democratic communication. In the original Normandin experiment, 150 villagers took part in choosing themes, researching, interviewing, editing, and otherwise manipulating technical equipment during three hours of nightly television distributed by cable through five towns in the region (see Girard, 1985). The experience led to the creation of Quebec’s first community broadcasting council, in which individual members and representatives of some fifty community associations participated regularly. Later, as community television took hold and spread, similar councils were formed in other regions of Quebec (see Canadian Radio-Television Commission, 1974).

Quebec community television thus developed as an associative form of communication, made possible by provincial state subsidies and federal regulatory provisions.

The Canadian Radio-Television Commission (CRTC) in its earliest policy statements on cable (CRTC, 1969) urged cable operators to provide a community channel, and a Canadian Senate committee investigating ownership and control of Canadian mass media reiterated this expectation (Canada, 1970). But while the CRTC encouraged cable companies to provide for community programming, it did not make it obligatory. Of 387 cable companies licenced in 1972, only 139 provided some form of community programming, and “very, very few of these gave open access” (Rosen and Herman, 1977:87).

In 1975 the CRTC announced new regulations making the provision of a community channel a requirement for every cable undertaking in Canada (Canadian Radio-Television Commission, 1975a). At first the CRTC said that licensees would be further required to devote at least 10 per cent of gross annual subscription revenue to operating the community channel, but following an outcry from the industry it retreated from this position and decided to regulate the extent of cable company contributions. Instead, the CRTC said it would “expect licensees to allocate a reasonable percentage of their gross subscriber revenue for the ongoing operation of the community channel” (Canadian Radio-Television Commission, 1975b:14).

The CRTC still held out high hopes for the role that could be played by community programming, most significantly “its ability to turn the passive viewer of television into an active participant” (Canadian Radio-Television Commission, 1975b:5). But it was not prepared to oblige the cable entrepreneurs to support community programming with their profits.

More importantly, community television was not seen as a new sector, to be
fully developed to meet the needs that could not be filled by either national public broadcasting or commercial private broadcasting. The possibility of community-controlled cable systems, as opposed to community-access channels within privately owned systems, was never seriously explored. The CRTC’s policy of moral suasion depended entirely on the benevolence of the cable companies, while resting on the paternalistic premise that local programming, unlike national programming, required no public resources. Under the Canadian regulations, a means of distributing community programming was provided, without the means to produce the programming. The only exception, to a very limited degree, was in Quebec.

But even in Quebec, community television has suffered from a lack of autonomy. The CRTC model interjected the cable undertaking between community broadcasters and the regulatory authority, providing a politically convenient intermediary to be the first line of defence against “questionable” programming. Local cable companies, rather than a federal authority, would watch over the content of community programming.

In radio the situation was somewhat different. Community radio became possible as the result of a 1973 CRTC policy proposal for FM radio. Within a year, community radio stations took root in Vancouver (B.C.), Kitchener (Ont.), Chicoutimi (Que.), and Montreal. But here too, only the Quebec government was willing to systematically fund community radio, albeit again in a limited way, and aside from college campuses and northern Native communities (which constitute a case that would have to be studied separately), community radio has been largely restricted to Quebec. Community radio stations provide the only local programming services available in some sparsely populated regions where commercial broadcasters are not interested to tread. But in Montreal, where two community radio stations attract significant audiences, the CRTC has refused to allow those stations to increase their transmission power, thus helping to protect a heavily saturated market for commercial broadcasters (see Bréniel, 1987; Le Devoir, 1987).

By 1986 there were twenty-one community radio stations operating in Quebec, and another six were being organized. In community television, meanwhile, there were thirty-three active associations, and four in formation. Together, radio and television involved about 450 full and part-time workers, 4,000 volunteers, and 42,000 supporting members. The main source of revenue came in the form of Quebec government grants, although radio was increasingly able to finance itself partially through advertising, and about 10 per cent of the television stations’ budgets came in the form of contributions from cable companies—cable companies servicing organized community television associations contributed an average $6,000 apiece in 1986 (Canada, 1986).

The total sum of money involved was paltry, however. $3.8 million for radio and less than $2 million for television, about a third of the total coming in grants from Quebec. In the same year, Radio-Québec’s budget was close to $60 million; the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation received about $900 million from the fed-
eral government; and commercial advertising revenue for radio and television in Canada surpassed $1.5 billion (Canada, 1986).

In 1986 the federal Task Force on Broadcasting Policy recommended that community broadcasting be officially recognized as a distinct sector in the Canadian broadcasting system, “on an equal footing with the public and private sectors which it complements” (Canada, 1986:153). The task force commended the Quebec government for its support of community broadcasting and suggested that the federal government collaborate with the provinces in finding further support. Shortly thereafter, however, the Quebec government announced drastic cuts to the PAMEC program and said the community broadcasters would have to become self-sufficient.

By the end of the decade the future of Quebec community broadcasting was uncertain, but the vision of the community broadcasters was clear. To them, community broadcasting was “seen to be an instrument of service to the collective development of the community,” a form of communications that considers the public “first of all as citizen, and not as consumer” (Regroupement des organismes communautaires de communication du Québec, 1987).

Conclusion
This overview of the Quebec experience since 1960 has demonstrated the extent to which popular struggles surrounding media have reflected the array of social forces active at any given moment. In this, two general phenomena are notable: on the one hand, the way social movements use media to deal with their need for social communication; on the other hand, the way communication through media can become in itself a form of sociopolitical action.

The fabric of this action is what we might call “culture.” The action itself we might qualify as “cultural communication,” a useful conceptual category for appreciating the range of activity observed in Quebec with respect to media. For example, the failure of propaganda strategies, of the left or right, can be seen as the shortcoming of a strictly political approach that ignores the cultural dimension. But, as indicated earlier, there is also in Quebec a certain inevitable complicity between the most conservative media and the most radical; the complicity lies in the shared quality of cultural resistance that both provide vis-à-vis the outside.

This is not to suggest culture as a leveller of social barriers or as a mediator of social conflict. Indeed, there are within Quebec society at least two clearly defined and opposing political cultures: a culture of conservative nationalism, and a communitarian culture. The particularly troublesome nature of the Quebec state arises from the fact that both political cultures see the Quebec state as an agent of social development. The ambiguities inherent in the media experiences of the 1970s and 1980s in which the Quebec state was directly involved stem from this duality.

In the earlier period, media initiatives were somewhat simpler to characterize: The typical alternative social or political movement of the 1960s emerged with no consciously articulated strategy for communication. Gradually, as its critical perspective on society expanded, a critical awareness of media set in, leading to the
integration of some sort of action with respect to media and the movement's general action plan.

At least three types of media practice emerged from this context: the creation of alternative media, direct action aimed at media, and attempts to influence media from within. At the extremities of the spectrum of media-directed action were attempts to use media as propaganda and attempts to market movements to the mainstream media.

The experiences of educational and community broadcasting were singular examples that have the added feature of central involvement on the part of the Quebec state—a state, it is essential to recall, with relatively little sovereignty over matters related to communication. Within the general Canadian context, educational and community broadcasting are part of the enlarged public sector that came into being in the 1970s, holding out a promise of decentralization and democratization (see Lorimer and McNulty, 1985). In Quebec, these sectors took on a particularly political overtone.

By the late 1980s the thwarting of popular aspirations with respect to Radio-Québec pointed to the fact that the Quebec state is, after all, a state, and should not be viewed as necessarily more benevolent or more democratic than its Canadian parent. The crisis in community broadcasting pointed to the dangers inherent in a financial dependency relationship between movement and state.

There is an important distinction to be made between the media projects of the 1960s and 1970s, which attempted to function with maximum autonomy and in political opposition to the domination of state and capital, and those of the 1970s and 1980s, which were politically less clearly situated. Under the sign of "community," for example, many popular media practices were, in the 1980s, subjected to the normative influence of state subsidy programs and regulatory procedures (see Sénécal, 1981).

On the other hand, community media were still an important breach in the social firmament. For Quebec was not exempt from the worldwide current of conservatism, and in fact it is not unusual for manifestations of the geopolitical climate to become more pronounced in Quebec. (Scholars often wonder whether Quebec is the least advanced of the advanced industrial countries, or the most developed of the underdeveloped countries; in either case, its status places it on the periphery of world affairs, subjecting it to the shock waves of development.)

Private-sector mainstream media in Quebec today are increasingly concentrated in the hands of fewer and fewer powerful owners, and it is virtually impossible for small entrepreneurial or independent non-profit media to break into the market. In the public sector, the tensions between Quebec and Ottawa are marked by a retreat of both governments from their traditional responsibilities. In the small space that remains between capitalist and state-based initiatives, the generation of activists that came of age in the 1960s is wiser but reluctant to embark on new adventures, while for the most part the younger generation of Quebec is less inclined to view media in a sociopolitical sense.
In this context, a strategy based on the demand for basic democratic human rights with respect to communication appeared appropriate, and in the early 1990s popular initiatives focused on the centre of the system: policy intervention with respect to such questions as the defence of public broadcasting, demands for access and fair representation, media literacy education, democratization of media. At the same time, people involved in autonomous media initiatives were aware of the need to deal with such questions as marketability and quality as well as social purpose.

The legacy of the previous thirty years was the knowledge that success or failure of these initiatives would depend on two things: establishment of a “rapport de force” with the dominant social and political forces, and discovery of a cultural link with a popular constituency.

Notes
1. A number of excellent texts are available in English for readers wishing more detailed background on Quebec. For a general history, see Linteanu, Durocher and Robert (1983). In addition to McRoberts and Posgate (1980), for an overview of the social history and contemporary political context see Milner and Milner (1972), and Fraser (1985). On the context of Quebec media in Canada, see McCormack (1981, 1983). For more detailed studies of some of the material covered in this article, and related matters, see Raboy (1984, 1990). For an official view of the Quebec government’s position on culture and communications, see French (1987).

2. Regarding concentration of ownership in the Canadian media, see Canada (1970, 1981, 1986). For a polemical and descriptive account of the phenomenon in Quebec, see Keable (1985). Since 1987 alone the following developments have occurred: the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission approved the sale of Quebec’s largest private television station, Télé-Métropole, to Quebec’s largest cable distributor, Vidéotron; the Quebec government sold its holdings in newspaper production to a consortium formed by the Quebecor publishing chain (Le Journal de Montréal) and British press magnate Robert Maxwell; the Uni Média newspaper chain was sold to a holding company owned by Toronto financier Conrad Black, publisher of the Daily Telegraph (London).

3. Canada’s Broadcasting Act was completely revised in 1991 and now recognizes both educational and community broadcasting as integral parts of the Canadian broadcasting system. Meanwhile, jurisdictional questions surrounding communications and culture were once again in the foreground in the debate over Canada’s constitutional future. Several official reports commissioned by the Quebec government urged the province to demand repatriation of all powers in these sectors, while Ottawa’s proposals tabled in September 1991 offered provincial governments the possibility of owning and operating full-fledged public broadcasting undertakings, subject to federal regulation.

4. The irony of all this was not lost on a group of French researchers who studied Quebec community media in the mid-1970s and noted the dependency of oppositional electronic media in Quebec on state support. In Europe, where state intervention in the cultural sphere has a long tradition, autonomous “médias libres” were flourishing, while in free enterprise North America, granting agencies were in full bloom. See Barbier-Bouvet, Beaud and Flichey (1979).
References


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