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 preceded 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. Throughout 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 international youth movement of the 1960s were linked with the specific Québécois demands 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 independence. 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 professionelle 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 Féderation professionelle 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 per cent 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[i]). 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-