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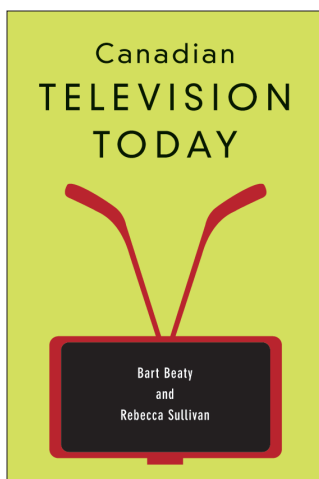
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CANADIAN TELEVISION TODAY
by Bart Beaty and Rebecca Sullivan
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CHAPTER TWO: PRO

D G R A M M I N G

A short article in the April 3, 2004, issue of *TV Guide* by Ben Mulroney encapsulates the current state of Canadian television programming. Mulroney, the son of the former prime minister and host of CTV's celebrity infotainment show *eTalk Daily*, describes his successes as an interviewer on the red carpet at the Academy Awards, which was broadcast by ABC and carried live in Canada by CTV. Mulroney writes: "Sandwiched between Joan Rivers and Roger Ebert, CTV's position on the carpet was better than ever. We took advantage of the backlog of stars waiting to talk with the big American outlets, and gave Canadians what I thought was a truly star-packed hour" (Mulroney 2004). The image of the Canadian broadcaster gratefully picking up the scraps from American networks says much about how success is defined for Canadian television. Mulroney ends with an anecdote intended to display Canadian moxie in the face of such obvious domination by American broadcasters. Apparently due to the Herculean efforts of his team, they managed to secure an exclusive interview with Renée Zellweger. "If you're wondering how that situation came to pass," says Mulroney, "here it is: we begged. My talented and dedicated producer got down on her knees and begged Renée not to turn her back on Canada" (Mulroney 2004). This is a similarly apt image, Canadian television as a beggar on the global stage, prostrate at the feet of American celebrity culture.

If Mulroney's fond reminiscences make Canadian television appear somewhat desperate, this is likely because it is often difficult to

find bright spots on the English-Canadian television landscape. While it is worth looking in greater depth at contemporary shows that have earned a certain measure of success, such as CTV's *Corner Gas* and *Canadian Idol*, CBC's *The Greatest Canadian*, and the long-running *Degrassi* franchise, the fact remains that few Canadian dramatic or entertainment shows are watched in large numbers, and American programs dominate the ratings. In the spring of 2006, for example, the most popular entertainment programs on Canadian television were all American: *CSI*, *American Idol*, *CSI: Miami*, *Survivor*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Amazing Race*, *House*, and *Criminal Minds*. *Corner Gas*, placing thirteenth on the list, was the only Canadian entertainment show in the top twenty. And while many point to the success of *Canadian Idol* as evidence that Canadians will watch their own, its success came during the late summer months, not during the regular season against the full-range of American competition. The ratings for popular television shows in Canada demonstrate not only that there is little difference between this country and the United States, but also that Canadians have few programming options other than major American network fare and smaller-scale Canadian productions.

The usual arguments for or against Canadian programs are often used to foster a division between what is deemed good for Canadians and what Canadians actually like. This is, of course, tied to television's historic reputation as a mass medium that is devoid of any edifying qualities. Thus, more than anything else, the anxiety over Canadian programming is deeply tied to notions of television as an inherently lowbrow medium that could, if suitably linked with good national values, be legitimated in terms of its service to the state, rather than through its aesthetic content. This is evident in the way that the industry has been regulated and monitored by successive governments since the earliest days of broadcasting. Further, it is one of the reasons why many studies on Canadian television focus more on the broadcasting system itself than on how that system is used, experienced, and valued by viewers on an everyday basis. When actual television programs do become the subject of debate, it is often in the form of a culturally nationalist outcry over the propensity of Canadians to

watch American shows not only as a threat to sovereignty but also as a sign of plain poor taste. As Tracey and Redal argue, the viewing patterns of Canadians undermine the traditional rhetoric of our cultural distinction not just by demonstrating what we as a nation are not, but more troublingly, by clearly pointing out what we are: a nation that watches *America's Funniest Home Videos* in even greater proportional numbers than Americans (1995, 306). Attempts to rescue television from the American clutches through various political interventions ranging from quotas to programming funds are not necessarily illegitimate or a waste of taxpayers' money. They are, however, a rather ineffectual mask for the actual, unarticulated problem that has been present from the earliest days of television, which is the fear that it is a debased, populist medium beyond saving.

It should be stated here that the conception of Canada as merely a satellite of the American television marketplace is not entirely accurate. For one thing, Canada has many channels producing Canadian content that are simply not available in the United States. From this perspective, one could argue that Canada is the American broadcasting regime with a number of additional channels, or AmericaPlus. At the same time, however, a large number of American channels are denied to Canadians by the CRTC, ranging from MTV to The Disney Channel. Insofar as these channels are desirable to some Canadian viewers, Canadian broadcasting is experienced as AmericaMinus. To remain at this level of discussion, however, is to miss a broader point: Canada continues to define its television in direct reference to one other national market, the United States, rather than in terms of a far more expansive global culture. Even though Canada is the second largest exporter of television programs, very few Canadian stations provide the same kind of access to programming from other foreign markets (Tinic 2005, 159). Furthermore, what is available is usually on specialty "ethnic" or foreign-language services that are managed in such a way as to ensure very little cross-over audience except from those communities they are very narrowly designed to serve. Thus, the mainstream Canadian television market is limited to a triangulation of UK programming, which comprises only a tiny share and is usually marketed as prestige culture, U.S. programming, far and away

the largest content provider and defined as commercialized product with a low-risk built-in audience, and Canadian shows which serve a primarily compensatory role filling in the gaps left behind by the other two.

In this sense, then, Canadian entertainment programming is not necessarily intended to be strictly for pleasure. As the self-congratulatory tone of Ben Mulroney suggests, even the most banal Canadian television event shoulders the burden of defining the nation through references to the United States – AmericaPlus or AmericaMinus. This narrow view of television’s potential to mediate multiculturalism is borne out in the practices of the three major networks in Canada. CTV and Global expend most of their budget purchasing the rights to American programs for broadcast in Canada. CBC, on the other hand, with its focus on mostly Canadian television (with the notable exceptions of American movies and British soap operas), seeks to distinguish itself through appeals to traditional Canadian nationalism. Significantly, few of the CBC’s programs, with the exception of NHL hockey, fare particularly well with the public. Nationalism, it seems, has its costs.

The struggle of the private broadcasters – primarily CTV and Global, but increasingly CHUM (since its purchase of Craig Broadcasting) and specialty channels like Alliance-Atlantis’ Showcase – to fill their evenings with as many popular American shows as the CRTC will allow is standard in contemporary Canadian broadcasting. Shows like *American Dad*, *American Idol*, and *American Chopper* air unironically on Canadian channels with promotional bumpers touting “Canadian Television,” to borrow CTV’s tag-line. Broadcasters and the CRTC argue that this state of affairs is necessary so that Canadian networks can continue to produce high-quality Canadian shows like Ben Mulroney’s *eTalk Daily*, but as American programs crowd out Canadian-produced material on the primetime schedules of Canadian broadcasters, it is difficult at times to imagine how this can possibly be the case. When Canadian programming consists of little more than inserting Ben Mulroney into cutaway segments during the Academy Awards, it is clear that the notion of Canadian content is increasingly bereft of meaning.

PRIMETIME SCHEDULING AND SIMULTANEOUS SUBSTITUTION

American shows are so important to Canadian television that they drive not only programming but also scheduling decisions, relegating Canadian dramas to the status of perennial bridesmaid. Ellen Baine, programming head of CHUM Television, notes that decisions for Canadian audiences cannot be made until the American schedules are settled: "For Canadians, the simulcasting is very important. You have to know what the Americans are doing" (in MacDonald 2004a). In fact, Canadian networks generally do not release their schedules until the American networks have finalized their own. The level of dependency is so acute that in 2000, when the American networks were delayed in publishing their schedules due to the uncertainty surrounding the dates of the debates in their presidential election, Canadian networks similarly followed suit ("New shows" 2000). The reason is simple. In order for Canadian networks to get optimum value for their purchases of American programs, they need to air the shows at the same time as they are aired in the United States. This allows the Canadian channel to use signal substitution to replace the American version of the show with the Canadian version on the American channel, thereby forcing Canadian viewers to watch Canadian advertisements and program promos. Simultaneous signal substitution is the very heart and soul of contemporary Canadian television, and the clearest indicator that economic models of national broadcasting are winning out over any cultural arguments. It is based on an industrial logic in which the audience merely serves a supporting role. In essence, the idea behind simultaneous substitution is that it is better for Canadians to watch *Law and Order* on a Canadian-owned station with Canadian advertisers than to watch it on an American NBC affiliate. Cultural arguments for "Canadian stories" go out the window here, leaving not much more than a vast network of protectionist regulations to prop up wealthy media industries with vague justifications about cultural sovereignty thrown in to silence critics.

It is difficult to imagine that Canadian television would exist in the form that it does today were it not for simultaneous substitution.

Removing this practice would seriously dilute the value of American programming on Canadian channels, reducing advertising revenues accordingly. The threat to revenue is felt so keenly that the CRTC has made substitution an integral aspect of broadcasting policy despite the fact that the practice annoys a large number of viewers. The problem is that it is often performed poorly, as when a signal change is made too late or too early, when a portion of a program is cut off by the Canadian broadcaster, or when promotional bumpers for programs are pre-empted. If this does not seem to be a particular hardship, it is nonetheless worth considering how this practice places the audience in a position of serving the broadcasters, rather than the other way around. While most of the time Canadians fume in silence, the issue comes to the forefront annually at the time of the NFL Super Bowl, where the commercials have become a part of the total entertainment package. As one of the most-watched events in television each year, the Super Bowl is increasingly a showcase for high-profile new advertisements. However, most American advertisers do not place these ads on Global, the Canadian broadcaster of the game. To the CRTC, this is a problem caused by American advertisers' unwillingness to spend money in Canada. For many Canadian viewers, it is a problem with a regulatory system designed to protect Canadian networks from competition. The CRTC publishes a standard statement about substitution and the Super Bowl on its website to offset the usual onslaught of viewer complaints. The justification is straightforward: "The use of simultaneous substitution means that more Canadians are watching Canadian stations, thus strengthening our broadcasting system as a whole.... With these increased revenues, Canadian broadcasters have a greater ability to make a financial contribution to the funding and production of Canadian television and to purchase quality programming" ("Signal substitution" 2004). Thus, according to the CRTC, if audiences don't watch the latest of Bell's beaver-themed advertisements then cultural sovereignty is undermined altogether.

As the CRTC states quite simply, the central argument in favour of simultaneous substitution is that the revenue generated by ads for American primetime programming can be used to subsidize less popular Canadian fare. This argument presumes that, in the absence of

simultaneous substitution regulations, Canadian channels would offer no Canadian content. It sets up Canadian programming as a national duty. This is certainly a plausible position, particularly given the many efforts undertaken by Canadian private broadcasters to reduce or evade their licence obligations to provide Canadian content. In 2004/05, for example, private broadcasters spent \$1.3 billion on acquiring programming, but only \$587 million of that went to Canadian shows. And of that amount spent on indigenous programming, \$369 million was for news and information shows, while only \$86.6 million went to drama (CRTC 2006). However, the question remains: how would Canadian networks survive if the safety net of simultaneous substitution were removed? If American networks no longer needed to sell their shows to Canadian stations and could simply run them through their border affiliates – or through their own Canadian affiliates – it would be one less bureaucratic hurdle for them. That would significantly harm the easy economics of American programs for Canadian networks. Faced with this prospect, the networks could either stumble along with reduced revenues, or develop business strategies to win over Canadian viewers from American programs. Television producers and network chiefs tell us that this can't be done, but the example of Quebec, where all of the most popular shows are produced in the province and not merely imported from France, indicates that it is far from impossible. Indeed, there have been enough successes for Canadian television programs to suggest that, when pushed, network programmers can develop material that Canadians enjoy. However, they serve as much to highlight the problems facing Canadian television and its narrow outlook as they do to suggest alternative routes of success. Indeed, by always looking over its shoulder to see what America is doing, the country fails to look ahead at other potential markets.

Finding original Canadian series on the primetime schedule is becoming more and more difficult. While CBC still holds itself as exemplifying all that is noble and uplifting about Canadian broadcasting, chinks have begun to show in its armour. The 2004/05 CBC schedule, for example, had less Canadian content than has appeared on the network in prime time in many years. While the network continues to boast that it offers a “mostly Canadian” schedule (Canadian

Press 2004), it nonetheless added the long-running British soap opera *Coronation Street* to its nightly primetime schedule. When their flagship Canadian program, *Hockey Night in Canada* was cancelled following the 2004/05 NHL lockout and the subsequent cancellation of the hockey season, CBC filled their Saturday nights with triple features of Hollywood movies, most of which, like Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*, had aired many times before on other stations. They had little else to offer in 2004 in terms of indigenous dramatic programming, other than the return of stalwarts such as *Da Vinci's City Hall* and *This is Wonderland*. Then, in March 2006, even those programs were cancelled. With scheduling decisions such as these, the CBC's ongoing commitment to Canadian content appeared limited to lip service to cultural nationalists. Friends of Canadian Broadcasting wrote to CBC president Robert Rabinovitch in October 2004, to suggest that the CBC replace NHL games with CHL games, thereby maintaining Canadian content, providing more national sports coverage, and exposing Canadians to other forms of hockey, instead of the increasingly American-dominated NHL. The CBC responded by noting that they did not hold the rights to broadcast CHL games, that reruns of older hockey games had fared poorly in the ratings, and, most importantly, that the turn to American movies is, as programming head Slawko Klymkiw noted, "not a cultural strategy; it's a revenue strategy" (Zelkovich 2004a). One month into the *Movie Night in Canada* experiment, the films were initially doing ratings comparable to those of the NHL broadcasts, averaging 1.1 million viewers in comparison to hockey's 1.2 million (MacDonald 2004b), further bolstering the economic argument for a protected national public broadcaster at the expense of any cultural justification.

Nonetheless, despite its failings, the CBC's commitment to distinctly Canadian programming still outpaces that of private broadcasters Global and CTV. Global, for example, ran only one Canadian-produced drama in 2005, *Zoe Busiek: Wild Card*, which features American star Joely Fisher and is set in Chicago. In November 2004, the network fired their Canadian programming heads and replaced them with Americans, leading many to wonder if their meagre commitment to Canadian programming would come under further attack (Davidson 2004). They got their answer three months later when

the only Canadian dramatic series on their schedule was cancelled. Similarly, CTV announced a small number of new dramatic shows for the 2004/05 season, including *Robson Arms* and *Instant Star*, but did not immediately air them. All in all, it seemed clear in 2004 that Canadian dramas and sitcoms were not high priorities for Canada's broadcast networks nor has support subsequently rebounded. In fact, in 2006, CBC followed the example of Global and hired an American film producer, Fred Fuchs, to take over as the executive director of Arts and Entertainment Programming. When asked his opinion on what the CBC is doing right or wrong, he answered, "It's really too early for me to understand the complexities of all the issues" (Dixon 2006). In 1999 the networks were airing eleven Canadian-made hour-long primetime dramas, but by 2003/04 that number had declined to six (Gill 2004). One year later, two of these six were cancelled.

It is clear that the Canadian primetime schedule is driven not by the interests and desires of Canadians but by the trends and formulas of American networks. Very little risk is taken as both private and public broadcasters rely on programming that has already been tested and proven successful elsewhere. The example of reality television is indicative of Canadian broadcasters' dependency on America and their hesitancy to look beyond that north-south axis to build broadcasting alliances on a more truly global scale. Canadian private broadcasters have quickly snatched up American versions of reality shows with the same enthusiasm they have shown for network dramas. Describing the 2004/05 schedule, for example, Loren Mawhinney, head of Global's Canadian programming, said: "People seem to be very very interested in reality still. It's very hard for a Canadian series to drive the audience in the same way" ("Networks" 2004). Indeed, Global was so tied to the increasingly faltering reality bandwagon that they proposed an all-reality television diginet to the CRTC, and the CBC hired Pia Marquand to be a "reality guru" (Gill 2004).

The rise of reality programming isn't just a problem of Canadian broadcasters continuing to poach American programming. It also raises questions about just how innovative broadcasters are in trying to create a unique Canadian television culture that embraces our multicultural heritage. The big lie of reality television is that it is an example

of lowbrow American programming. In fact, many of the most popular shows were adapted from original European shows. Thus, if anything, it appears that American broadcasters are far more aware of global television trends than we are. If Canadian television producers are constantly on the lookout for affordable programming alternatives, why did it take American producers to borrow the low-budget *Survivor* concept from the Swedes, the *Big Brother* concept from the Dutch, and the *Pop Idol* concept from the British? Alexandra Gill implies in *The Globe and Mail* that Canada, with its focus on ennobling and educational television, simply could not conceptualize the lowbrow reality fare: “For the most part, however, we could hold our heads high and tell ourselves this was just another big, fat, obnoxious trend tempting us from afar. Other than Ben Mulroney and his merry Canadian Idols, reality was not the type of television we were very good at making” (Gill 2004). The timing for Canada to leap into the reality waters only after it had proven itself in America, however, suggests not a snob-induced lethargy, but rather a failure of creativity and openness to alternative programming models that keep other second-tier market nations afloat. Maureen Parker, executive director of the Writer’s Union of Canada observes, “There’s no risk, no gamble, no investment. They’re just purchasing formats from other countries” (in Gill 2004). However, it isn’t even from multiple countries, given that Canadian broadcasters don’t try a format that hasn’t been proven in the United States. Thus, for example, the networks purchase *Big Brother* from CBS but not the original – and far more racy – European version.

Of course, not all Canadian reality shows are straightforward derivatives of American vehicles; some actually try to give a distinctly Canadian angle. A case in point is *Making the Cut*, CBC’s thirteen-part reality show about hockey players attempting to win a spot in the training camps of the six Canadian NHL teams. *The Globe and Mail*’s television critic, John Doyle, praised the show as representative of everything that is right and true about Canadian culture. Doyle writes, “Gorgeously made and rich in Canadian archetypes, it’s the perfect expression of who we are”; that it is “all so abundant in scenes and

situations that strike a Canadian chord”; and that it is “about destiny, determination and luck. It’s also vastly entertaining and very much ours” (Doyle 2004). For Doyle, *Making the Cut* is a perfect exemplar of the values and traditions that differentiate Canada from the United States and the rest of the world. Indeed, he goes so far as to equate the show with the very source of Canadian cultural life: “We can speculate forever about why hockey has such depth of meaning in the collective soul. A rough but still-elegant game played on the ice by men wearing layers of protection, often at night, is partly primordial in significance – it about the need to defeat the ice, cold and darkness, and frolic in the face of the elements that could defeat us if we allowed ourselves to be diminished by them. It’s about surviving. It’s about defeating death” (Doyle 2004). Despite such poetry, the show did not apparently speak to Canadians as strongly as it spoke to John Doyle. Ratings for the show started poorly and dropped over time, pulling in slightly more than 400,000 viewers on Tuesday nights and trailing even other Canadian shows airing at the same time on CTV (“Sports reality” 2004). Global’s programming head, Alan Ivars, suggested that the show may have been undermined by the lack of a compelling story. He states, “What drives reality shows are the characters. If the characters aren’t compelling, it doesn’t matter what the backdrop is – hockey or boxing or wrestling – it’s not going to work. The reason shows like *Making the Cut* aren’t working is that they’re focusing more on the backdrop than on the characters” (“Sports reality” 2004). That backdrop is the aching need to prove its Canadianness by doling out every stereotype that cultural nationalists crave and insisting that we recognize ourselves in a picture that looks increasingly less like the country in which we all live.

Of course, criticizing shows like *Making the Cut* for wallowing in homogenous cultural stereotypes is one thing, but the more important issue is to explore the particular ways that Canadian shows mobilize nationalist tropes in order to prove their civic value and justify the millions of public support dollars given to shore up a production industry that seems to make products that the country doesn’t really want. If the goal is to create some kind of a sense of common national character through the various forms of the television medium, then

most people would argue that Canadian broadcasting has failed, and they would correctly point to the lack of programs and weak ratings for the few that do exist. However, there are many cases in which Canadian television organizes itself for survival, if not outright success. Canadians tend to associate the key problems surrounding national television with dramatic or entertainment production, but the best successes tend to happen in the realms of informational programming. This is borne out in a recent study by Statistics Canada that notes that Canadians watch news and sports almost as frequently as they do comedy and drama – with each occupying 34.4 and 36.2 per cent of viewing time respectively. However, when the percentage of viewing time is broken down between Canadian and non-Canadian programming, the numbers change dramatically. Of all comedy and drama programming, only 18 per cent of it is Canadian. By contrast, out of the total news and sports viewing, 70 per cent is Canadian (Statistics Canada 2005). Yet, dramatic programming is still considered the pinnacle of television achievement, at least on the cultural level, despite the fact that it is frequently an economic loser. More importantly, it is the primary driver of cultural nationalists who argue for broadcasting policies that place a premium on telling Canadian stories.

Nonetheless, the tendency has been in the past for scholars and critics to deftly avoid looking concretely at Canadian dramatic or entertainment shows and focus instead on policy, history, and technology issues. Part of the reason for this is that so few shows enter into a kind of public consciousness where there is enough common knowledge to discuss them in any depth. However, we feel there is another more problematic reason why television content is so downplayed. It has something to do with the nagging sense that television isn't worthy of lengthy, introspective debate because of its inherently populist appeal. In other words, while the idea of the CBC is well worth exploring in depth, *The Royal Canadian Air Farce*, one of its longest-running shows, is not.

ENTERTAINMENT PROGRAMMING: WHAT MAKES A STORY CANADIAN?

Interestingly, what is not often openly acknowledged is that the backbone of Canadian television production is cheaply produced syndication shows designed for the international market. This is a far cry from the noble intentions of governmental support agencies that are intent on bolstering quality shows for a distinctly Canadian audience. Anyone who has been channel flipping and stumbled over such shows as *StarGate SGI*, *Relic Hunter*, or *PSI Factor* is seeing the most abundant fruits of the Canadian television production sector. Very few of these shows have any kind of Canadian indicators, and most, like *Sue Thomas: FBEye* are clearly set in the United States. In many ways, these shows are the logical outcomes of what producers in the United States call “runaway productions”: American-funded programs that take advantage of low Canadian currency exchange, cheaper labour, and significant tax incentives to produce their shows here. *X-Files*, the legendary cult show that aired on Fox from 1993 to 2002, is the most successful of these, but as American specialty cable networks become more invested in developing original programming, the lure of lower production overhead brings them north of the border. Between runaway productions and the syndication market, the Canadian television experience can tend to slide into a kind of parlour game in which viewers try to guess the filming locale that is meant to stand in for Chicago, or pick out Canadian actors in bit roles. Both Pat Mastroianni (Joey Jeremiah from the long-running *Degrassi* franchise) and Nicholas Campbell (*Da Vinci's Inquest*), for example, had small guest star turns on the short-lived ESPN show *Playmakers*, which followed the ups and downs of an American professional football team, but which was filmed at Toronto's SkyDome. Supporters of the syndication and runaway production model argue, quite legitimately, that such shows are important to the economic life of Canada's cultural and entertainment sectors. They shore up an industry that employs thousands of artists, technicians, tradespeople, and professionals, making possible more risky, creative ventures when the time allows. Furthermore, as Tinic points out, they also serve as a kind of frontier resistance to the

centrist model of “quality Canadian programming” by offering production companies outside of the Toronto-dominated national market a chance to set their sights on international markets instead. Of course, as in almost all aspects of Canadian television, a sense of failure is built into this model, whereby the “real” Canadian shows that cultural nationalists lobby for, ones that showcase prestige performances, groundbreaking stories, or explicitly foster a sense of national identity, are assumed to not have the same drawing power as a show about a deaf FBI agent and her dog. Thus, in the name of middlebrow nationalism, these shows craftily keep their Canadian credentials in the shadows. They may be important to the Canadian television economy, but they’re the dirty little secret of Canadian television culture that is supposed to be above the populist pandering that supposedly characterizes American commercial product.

When networks create an explicitly Canadian show for the national market, they want to make sure you know it, often by throwing the word “Canadian” into the title, or by deliberately, almost archly avoiding any kind of glitzy polish in favour of a more down to earth and “like real life” look. Perhaps two of the most popular dramatic series that wear their Canadianism on their sleeves are the sleeper hit *Corner Gas* and the perennial favourite *Degrassi*, now in its fourth incarnation as *The Next Generation*. Both air on CTV, although *Degrassi* got its start on CBC in 1982, and both have garnered respectable ratings and critical raves, particularly by Canadian standards.

Corner Gas is a half-hour sitcom following the classic fish-out-of-water formula, in which Lacey Burrows moves from Toronto to the tiny Saskatchewan town of Dog River to take over her aunt’s diner. There she is befriended by the owner of the only gas station in town, who is played by Brent Butt, the creator of the show, as one of the few non-eccentrics dotting the rather barren landscape. Together the two observe with bemused pleasure the antics of their friends, family, and neighbours in this isolated farming community. Certain stock Canadian characters are present, including the native police chief and the young hoser. Storylines are built around small themes of everyday life, such as when Lacey discovers that the entire town believes the rather doughy Brent is a hot stud. The pace of the show

is deliberately low-key, and the humour is ironic and observational as it knowingly plays on standard national stereotypes and then winks smartly at the expectations of the audience for a Canadian show. In that sense, then, *Corner Gas* succeeds in fulfilling nationalist tropes of distinct Canadian stories, but it creates a sense of concordance with the audience that these tropes are tired, paternalistic, and sometimes even downright insulting. At the same time, its sympathy for rural life is explicit, and its intentionally non-network look and feel, even as it borrows liberally from an American genre, suggests that this is not a show for anyone other than Canadians. Thus, it helps to perpetuate an artificial divide between those Canadian dramatic series designed for the global market that consciously hide their identity in order to fit with a perceived homogenous standard and are almost embarrassing in their low production values and the more inward-looking form of homogeneity that preserves cultural and financial investment for a show that presents a bucolic although slightly cynical small-town Canada that resonates with all the common indicators of how we are like America, but not.

Degrassi: The Next Generation also plays with these strategies of distinction from American programs, and claims a position of prestige against its most obvious competitors like the Fox shows *The O.C.* and its predecessor *Beverly Hills 90210*. Unlike these shows, which feature older and beautiful actors playing teenagers who drive sports cars, live in Malibu mansions, and wear high-fashion designer wear to school, *Degrassi* has always characterized itself as being a honest, unflinching look at growing up. Much ink has been spilled over the years distinguishing it from its American counterparts, noting the gawkiness of some of the actors as they pass puberty, and their blossoming on screen over successive seasons and series. If anything, since CTV revived the franchise with a new cast of characters based on the now-grown-up characters from *The Kids from Degrassi*, *Degrassi Junior High*, and *Degrassi High*, the show has been criticized for not being gritty enough. Certainly production quality is noticeably higher and the soap opera storylines have been intensified as emotional plots involving issues like school shootings, sex parties, and date rape are played out quickly and dramatically. The nostalgia factor also runs

high as characters from the former series provide the framework for the new show, especially the all-too-formulaic family of Emma, the now-teenage daughter of Spike/Christine, and her step-father Snake/Archie who is also her home room teacher and was Spike's school-days friend. Both parents were featured players in the original series and their friends, in particular the popular romantic couple Joey and Caitlin, have also been written into the storyline. The cult-like success of *Degrassi* has been bolstered by such high-profile fans as Kevin Smith, the indie director of *Dogma* and *Mall Rats*, who directed and guest-starred in a three-episode arc for the 2004/05 season. There was also a lengthy feature in the *New York Times Magazine* heralding it as "tha Best Teen TV N da WRLD!" for its ability to capture the reality of high school life, and its deft balance between educational and entertainment television (Neihart 2005). Originally syndicated in the United States by PBS but now showing on the specialty children's network Nickelodeon, *Degrassi* has spawned a fiercely loyal audience in the United States, a point that is made frequently in reviews and profiles of the show. Interestingly, what is often referenced is the idea that the show demonstrates the higher level of sophistication of Canadian audiences, who can handle such controversial storylines as abortion while those episodes had to be pre-empted in the States. Thus, again, the success of *Degrassi* as a distinctly Canadian show is defined through its ability to emulate American television but only because it is more edifying, less commercial.

Canadian dramatic television successes like *Corner Gas* and *Degrassi: The Next Generation* point to the way that popular Canadian television shows are generally assessed along strictly nationalist terms and in relation to the American market, and seen in terms of the way that they register similarities to and differences from similar American material. The same is true, only more so, for the recent ventures into reality television. Two of the more successful Canadian programs are actually borrowed concepts from the UK and the United States. *Canadian Idol* is a franchise of *American Idol*, which in turn borrowed the concept from the UK's *Pop Idol*. More conspicuously nationalistic, *The Greatest Canadian* aired on CBC and encouraged audiences to vote for their favourite Canadian personality. It was adapted from

the BBC series *Great Britons*, which has subsequently been franchised around the world.

Produced by CTV and hosted by celebrity hound Ben Mulroney, *Canadian Idol* is one of the most popular Canadian shows in history, claiming the number one spot in the ratings for the finale of its second season. Although the model for the show had existed in Europe for years prior, Canada waited until it had been successfully tested as an American brand before launching its own franchise. The structure of the show is simple. A panel of semi-celebrity judges, including minor 1980s pop star Sass Jordan, tours the country auditioning hopeful singing sensations. For the most part, one type of music is preferred, the “blue-eyed soul” of adult contemporary R&B, with occasional splashes of new country. The finalists return to Toronto for a series of weekly singing competitions that are voted on electronically by the viewing audience through special telephone and web services. The winner receives a recording contract and a cross-country tour. As the ultimate branch-plant program, *Canadian Idol* certainly demonstrates the worst that can happen when the homogenizing influences of globalization take hold of the airwaves. The show is numbingly formulaic, much like contemporary pop radio, and the hyperactive antics of Ben Mulroney only heighten the feeling that not much is really going on here. However, it is incredibly successful not only in ratings but also in drumming up a sense of regional pride that then reverberates on a national level as the show nears its finale. Idol audition dates are widely publicized events that garner enormous attention by local media. While the bulk of the show takes place in Toronto, the weeks leading up are set in some of the smaller towns in the country like Medicine Hat, Alberta, which was home to the second season winner, Kalan Porter. In that sense, then, the hopes and dreams of the contestants are mirrored in that of the country as a whole, to somehow be bigger and better than they really are.

Interestingly, two key moments in the series highlight this anxiety to exceed expectations that is reflected in both singers and the country as a whole. In the first season, the American producers created a spin-off called *International Idol* in which the winners from various national versions of the show competed for the supreme top spot. The show

is mostly noteworthy for the fact that the odds-on favourite, American Kelly Clarkson, was blown out of the competition by the gap-toothed Norwegian winner, Kurt Nilsen, who departed from the formula by singing “Beautiful Day” by the Irish arena rock band U2. This is worth pointing out to show how in even the most egregious example of Americanized globalization, small glimmers of resistance persistently shine through. It’s also important because the Canadian contestant, Ryan Malcolm, revealed himself as being the least distinguished from the American model. Many of the countries showed some small measure of distinction by fielding contestants who didn’t necessarily look, sound, act, or sing like a star-factory American singer. Malcolm, by contrast, was noticeable by his carefully manufactured image, which completely fit within the mould set by the American version of the show – only duller. This bold AmericaMinus effort resulted in rather dismal rankings in the international competition. Malcolm was number one for Canadian voters, but his only other top three position was from the pan-Arabic region, and he finished sixth overall.

Perhaps chastened by their attempt to out-America *American Idol* in the first season, the second season of *Canadian Idol* decided to put a much more explicitly Canadian spin on the show, at least for one night. It featured a special all-Canadian evening of songs, in particular a tribute to the legendary folk singer Gordon Lightfoot, who was enjoying a resurgence of interest in the media due to a near-brush with death in 2002. CTV was not above using that fact to sell the episode, stating in its own online news story, “The six young singers left on *Canadian Idol* honoured a living Canadian legend – one who came perilously close to becoming a dead one” (“Idol hopefuls” 2004). Contestants were coached by Lightfoot into various tableau settings for renditions of such classics as “The Canadian Railroad Trilogy.” The ability of the *Canadian Idol* producers to generate media buzz is nearly unparalleled in the country, as again the media rushed to report on this unique, quintessentially patriotic moment. In an interview on *eTalk Daily*, Lightfoot himself played up the nationalist angle by noting how *Canadian Idol* can help lead to recording contracts for young singers and offering up the final summation that the show “is important for Canada” (“Canadian Idol” 2004). However, it was only one moment and a fleeting one at that, as

the next week they returned to the pat formula of primarily American Top 40 hits sung in flat, booming voices.

It is, perhaps, too easy to take potshots at *Canadian Idol* for its dull, homogenous programming, its unabashed borrowing of an American model with just enough flag-waving thrown in to pass itself off as an original Canadian series. In many ways, it represents the worst of Canadian television and offers renewed proof of why a national public broadcaster is so essential. However, CBC's major event of the 2004/05 season, around which it built the remainder of its schedule, closely followed the formula set out by reality show franchises, only set the flag waving to a frenetic pace. *The Greatest Canadian* was trumpeted as the thinking person's *Canadian Idol*. The series relied on votes cast by Canadians to establish a list of the fifty greatest Canadians to have ever lived, and then produced one-hour advocacy documentaries about each of the top ten finalists. The series concluded with ten celebrity advocates debating the merits of their nominees in front of a live studio audience, and, on the following night, the countdown to the final winner. The show was seen by television critics as an effort on the part of the CBC to deliberately shed their dour, stodgy image by undertaking a show that would be hip and edgy, yet still educational and ennobling. The fact that the concept was taken whole cloth from British television's *Great Britons* series was also reassuring as it not only mitigated any risk by going with a known successful formula, but also had that tinge of colonial respectability that BBC shows tend to bring. In promoting the show, and the newly hip status of the CBC in general, Slawko Klymkiw, the executive director of network programming, told *The Globe and Mail*: "We're showing a sense of humour and a populist side. CBC can't be serious and stodgy all the time" (Allemang 2004). Following this lead, producer Mark Starowicz argued that the show was the CBC's effort to proselytize the importance of Canadian history in a format that would be appealing to young people. By including MuchMusic VJ George Stroumboulopoulos (who inked a permanent deal with CBC Newsworld while the show was on the air) and ex-Hole bassist Melissa Auf der Mar as celebrity hosts for the finale, it was hoped that Canadian history could be made palatable to viewers who might otherwise avoid such an exercise. Starowicz claimed, "Our

job is to proselytize knowledge and art. It's in the Broadcasting Act. And the vast majority seem to appreciate this form – it's reaching a younger demographic" (Allemang 2004).

Starowicz' invocation of the broadcasting act to promote a reality television show may seem odd at first but it says much about the current condition of the public broadcaster as television becomes increasingly regulated according to economic rather than cultural goals. His assessment of the CBC's obligations is correct, but for the typical viewer sitting down on any given night to watch television, almost wholly irrelevant. The moral obligation to support Canadian culture and the desire of the viewer to be entertained on any given evening often exist in stark contrast to one another. The CBC, granted millions of tax dollars annually to present Canadians to themselves, has become the most important agency in terms of creating and disseminating Canadian culture, and its every move is scrutinized by supporters, critics, and, most importantly, governments. *The Greatest Canadian*, therefore, as an attempt to be both serious and irreverent at the same time, highlights the anxieties that plague Canadian culture. Neither genuinely elitist nor truly populist, the show signals the inherently middlebrow intentions of the CBC, even as the traditional model of creating programs that will enrich television for the greater good of the state is beginning to show its age.

While initially the show performed well, the lack of a strong celebrity culture in Canada led to weakening ratings as each successive hour-long profile of the top ten finalists dragged on. Further, it's hard to imagine how a show on Frederick Banting, the inventor of insulin, or Lester B. Pearson, the Nobel Prize-winning former prime minister, could be made riveting. Yet, audiences did return in slightly smaller-than-expected numbers for the final unveiling in which a host of media, political, and entertainment figures debated the merits of each contestant while final votes were counted and socialist politician Tommy Douglas, the father of medicare, was declared the winner. The CBC also declared themselves winners for attracting a more youthful audience and generating more buzz than they had in a long, long time (although only a small fraction of the media coverage generated by *Canadian Idol*). However, the show is clearly a one-time event, as the

idea of a second season is impossible. It seems as if the CBC does not want to sully itself in the reality waters too much lest it lose its privileged status as the haven for high-minded cultural achievements.

Some key themes can be derived from these four shows. The most obvious is the way that they each serve a compensatory role in their claims to offer up something distinctly Canadian but are still defined by their relationship to similar American (or in the case of *The Greatest Canadian*, British) programs. What is also important about their success, though, is how keenly aware each of them is of its lack of originality and its doggedly national outlook both in terms of ratings and the generation of critical media attention. Economically and culturally, then, Canadian television programming continues to look for the surefire formula for success on territorial grounds. The problem with Canadian television filling this compensatory role is that it is attempting to work within two modes that are often deemed antithetical: the popular and the prestigious. The situation is exacerbated by the contradictions also inherent in using culturalist arguments to justify a largely economic infrastructure. Ben Mulroney's claims that his exclusive interview with Zellweger serves as some kind of celebrity version of 'capture the flag' shows how populist Canadian programming seeks to both mimic the look and feel of American shows while still mitigating the guilt Canadian audiences are presumed to experience for going for glitz over substance. The alternative to this form of programming is the prestige show explicitly designed to offer a culturally, socially, and intellectually edifying experience, but which is not necessarily always entertaining. These are usually television movies or mini-series that have very explicit Canadian themes and recognizable actors and can be said to offer additional political or social value in addition to their function as national culture. There is, however, a third generalizable form of Canadian entertainment programming that operates somewhere between the populist and the prestigious and is best known for its ironic playfulness with myths of Canadian television. Usually, this kind of program is a humour or sketch comedy series that openly mocks the arch sincerity of the cultural nationalist argument even while slyly signalling that the audience knows they are in fact better than America. The prestige and the ironically populist,

therefore, serve as the two poles of establishing a sense of Canadian distinction vis-à-vis the United States. This was clearly seen at the 2004 Gemini awards.

Celebrating the best of English Canadian television production, the 2004 Gemini awards highlight a number of issues surrounding the current state of television. The big winner of the night was *Human Cargo*, a CBC co-produced mini-series that won seventeen awards, including those for writing, direction, and best mini-series or TV movie. In many ways, the low-rated series is a quintessential Canadian prestige project. The well-known stage and screen veteran, Kate Nelligan, stars as a Canadian immigration board member who must confront her own racism as she listens to the personal stories of immigrants, while her daughter volunteers on the front lines of a humanitarian crisis in Africa. Revolving around issues raised by racism, immigration policy, and official multiculturalism, *Human Cargo* is a classic example of how dramatic television programming can be used to reflect upon important issues facing Canada as a nation with an increasingly global outlook but from a resolutely nationalist perspective. Further, the show is bolstered by the presence of a raft of well-regarded Canadian actors supporting Nelligan, including Nicholas Campbell from *Da Vinci's Inquest*, Cara Pifko, the star of *This is Wonderland*, and R. H. Thomson, a feature actor in numerous Canadian prestige television shows and mini-series, including *Road to Avonlea* and *Trudeau*.

The producers of *Human Cargo* took pains to ensure that their project remained distinctly Canadian not only culturally but also economically. However, this decision is expressed ambivalently, beginning first on a rather patriotic note and then ending in a state of defeat and anxiety. In an interview in the *Vancouver Sun*, co-producer Brian McKeown notes, "It's a little Canadian production. It's very much a Vancouver production. Two little Vancouver companies have done this and we did it as 100-per-cent Canadian. The trick there, of course, was that we couldn't spend any more than 25 per cent of our budget outside the country. If we went offside on that our whole financial structure would collapse. We were totally, totally boxed in" (McNamara 2004). Thus, creating Canadian television is framed as an issue of working within funding guidelines to build a success, rather

than as a risk-taking production that does whatever is necessary to achieve an aesthetic goal. This sense of defiant defeatism also exists in the way the show was publicized as an obvious tough sell to audiences. As the *Calgary Herald* points out, “stories with Third World themes can be a hard sell in a medium that doesn’t usually look much beyond domestic borders” (Atherton 2004). Other reviews noted that it was “a dense slog” (Kohanik 2005) but recommended it as the kind of television that Canadians should be making and watching. Even the mini-series’ director, after winning a record seven Gemini, said rather pointedly, “It’s important to tell Canadian stories but in these days of the United States of Canada and Jesusland, it’s also important to look at stories about Canada and the world” (“A nice haul” 2004). Thus, even in a production that very deliberately separated itself from American visions both in terms of content and financing, the idea of presenting Canada within the world is defined against its perpetually present rival, rather than through the more complex multicultural lens that *Human Cargo* is supposed to be exploring.

The winner of the Gemini award for Best Comedy series offered a stark contrast to the kind of ennobling discourse surrounding *Human Cargo*. Showcase’s *Trailer Park Boys* beat out traditional CBC fare such as the long-running perennial *Red Green Show*, seven-time winner *This Hour Has Twenty-Two Minutes*, and the critically acclaimed *The Newsroom*, as well as CTV’s popular success story *Corner Gas* (which took the prize the next year). In winning the award, *Trailer Park Boys* became not only the first cable show to be so honoured, but the first non-CBC produced comedy to take home the Gemini in the comedy category. The win, therefore, signalled a shift in the thinking about the nature of “quality” comedy in Canada. *Trailer Park Boys*, which follows the profane exploits of three losers in a Halifax trailer park, is an edgy and family-hostile show that has gathered a cult following on cable and on DVD. It deliberately sets out to exploit the limitations of Canadian television production by using a mockumentary format that allows for visibly cheap production values and makes the small budget part of the overall feel of the show. Exported to the United States in censored form by BBC America, the show exemplifies the compensatory model from a global position. Its resolutely lowbrow premise and

crass humour would seem well at home on the American networks, nestled between *COPS* and *Wife Swap*. However, it airs on the arts-oriented channel Showcase in Canada and is mediated internationally through that stalwart of good taste, BBC, suggesting that the show is well aware that it is playing lowbrow but is in fact much smarter than that. With its love-it-or-hate-it appeal, *Trailer Park Boys* is the type of controversial award winner that Canada has rarely favoured, a Gemini winner that many would consider a possible worst-of nominee.

How is it that a show that exemplifies the traditional, nationalist model of Canadian broadcasting and a show that essentially thumbs its nose at such ideals could both earn the highest honours? The answer may lie within Linda Hutcheon's notion of the Canadian postmodern, in which the nation has conveniently skipped a step and is no longer even worried about achieving a state of unity or coherence in its national culture. Instead, a postmodern approach in which that very goal is doubled in on itself, in which it is both identified and named but then challenged and undermined simultaneously, may be taking precedence (1988, 6). In other words, what *Human Cargo* offers is the unsmiling, straightforward and sincere version of a myth of Canada that may well be desirable but comes with so much elitist baggage that it needs to be taken down a peg or two by also embracing *Trailer Park Boys*. At the same time, it is possible that this double-edged sword of Canadian television also reflects Canada's anxiety to be fully modern, and not its exuberance at bypassing this stage of evolution altogether. As Dorland and Charland argue, the persistent theme of survival in Canadian art and culture implies a project of Canada that is just struggling to stay alive, but not really expecting to ever be satisfactorily completed (2002, 50). This leaves a mildly bitter taste of irony tinged with a reflexive kind of cynicism in even the noblest of national building enterprises. Postmodern or modern-in-waiting, these two very different theories both provide some way of bridging the two halves into an alternative kind of whole: not a smooth, intact circle, but a concatenation of different and distorted shapes that together comprise an alternative view of the nation not from a modernist standpoint of cultural sovereignty but as one that is willing if not eager to open up its borders to multiple flows of cultural ideas and vantage points. What

the example of Canadian dramatic and entertainment programming has shown, however, is that in the fervent desire to define and shape television according to a deeply ambivalent and contradictory relationship to the United States, Canada has succeeded only in blocking out other promising cultural relationships and preventing this flow from happening.

To a certain degree, the economic realities of the mediascape are changing the situation for Canadian television production. The global broadcasting market is thirsty for content, and new models of financing make possible international cooperation between multiple countries. There is enormous potential for Canadian dramatic programming that abandons the nationalist dream of unity and identity and considers a globalized outlook of heterogeneous culture. Certainly, there is room on the dial, and old arguments of media scarcity have an antiquated feel to them in the era of digital, satellite, and other seemingly endlessly expansive technologies. Ironically, again Canada can look to the United States for assurance that alternatives to the mass broadcasting network exist. Niche programs like *Trailer Park Boys* which air on specialty cable channels offer exciting new opportunities both economically and culturally. Smaller-scale production, shorter seasons, and lower budgets are necessities reflecting smaller audience share and lower market penetration. However, rather than seeing these as a problem, niche networks like HBO have put their resources into fewer shows that stand out not only in terms of quality but also in risk-taking and challenging the borders of television. While for the most part these risks have been in the form of sex and violence, they nonetheless present a challenge to the Canadian tendency to crank out low-quality syndication shows with the justification that they can't compete with American network production values. However, for a new model of Canadian television to really make an impact, it is critical that the focus cease to be so narrowly and resentfully on America. A multicultural approach to Canadian television on a global scale leapfrogs Canada over traditional broadcasting models based on nationalism, cultural sovereignty, and protectionist policies. There are glimmers that it may be happening already with the 2005 winner for best drama. *Sex Traffic*, about the slave trade between the former Soviet Union and

western countries, was a co-production between a small Nova Scotia-based production company, the British stalwart Granada Television, and the CBC. While Hutcheon's arguments of a postmodern nation are controversial and challenged by many scholars of Canada, there is something promising there with regards to television that is worth considering. What if the hallmark of this nation was that it no longer was preoccupied with defining itself categorically and conclusively but was perpetually open to multiple cross-border flows of media and culture? In this way, there is no doubt that Canada has the potential to be an important leader in a new model of globalized broadcasting that is founded on principles of multiculturalism and heterogeneity.

RETURNING TO THE LOCAL: INFORMATION PROGRAMMING

Although we've painted a picture of a new Canadian television culture with near-utopian optimism, it is absolutely clear that it is not possible to simply trade a form of nationalism for a new form of globalization. To do so, even if it were possible, would be to fundamentally ignore a central function of television, which is local programming. And that requires a national infrastructure to support and maintain it. Dramatic and entertainment shows tend to be produced for the largest, therefore national and international, markets. Yet, as the StatsCan report shows, audiences in Canada are increasingly relying on television not for entertainment but for information (Statistics Canada 2005). It is little wonder, then, that some of the most successful Canadian shows are local news and sports broadcasts. The tendency of grey market satellite owners to maintain a Canadian basic cable subscription in order to receive local channels for news, sports, and weather is suggestive of the importance of local programming to television viewers. There is even a sizeable grey market satellite industry for ex-pat Canadians living

in the United States (Colker 2004). It appears, then, that information programming, which is rarely discussed by cultural nationalists as a crucial element of the broadcasting field, is far more effective at creating a sense of national unity than any uplifting dramatic mini-series.

Nonetheless, what makes local programming so valuable isn't its doggedly nationalist character but its commitment to the community. Even nationally based services like Newsworld, TSN, and the Weather Network tailor their programming to fit the needs and interests of the different regions in the country. Moreover, when they do this, it is regarded as part of a process of strengthening regional connections across the country, rather than undermining national unity. Obviously, the weather in Edmonton is of little or no value to someone deciding whether or not to carry an umbrella in Halifax. However, the local orientation of information programming in news and sports does say something about the way that the vastly different regions of this country fit together to create the conditions for a far more global, multicultural outlook on its national character. As Richard Collins argues, the traditional sense of Canada as in a perpetual state of identity crisis can actually be positive in that it allows for disruptions and disturbances in the cultural fabric with minimal anxiety (1990, 21). Thus, in the realm of information programming we can already find a microcosm of the disjunctural model of media flow in which constant adjustments and alternatives are made to fit specific local needs and interests.

Nowhere has this proven more important than in the distribution of evening news programs across the country. In the spring of 2000, faced with another round of budget cutbacks, the CBC made the highly controversial decision to abandon local news programs and centralize operations in Toronto. The 6:00 p.m. news hour, which had previously been produced by local CBC affiliates, would now be centrally produced and shipped out to affiliates across the country. The late evening news show, *The National*, would also continue without any corresponding local production. The outcry reverberated across the country, especially in the smaller markets and more remote, rural areas that felt that the public broadcaster was once again turning its back on its responsibility to serve the entire country and was now

enforcing a centrist, urban perspective. CBC president Robert Rabinovitch was singled out for criticism and accusations of destroying the national broadcaster and, with it, the nation itself. Some went so far as to suggest that the only reason he got the job, in February 2000, was because he promised not to fight for the CBC and try to secure more money from Parliament ("CBC dead" 2000). Furthermore, his controversial statement to the Standing Committee on Heritage that it is sometimes necessary to "risk a limb in order to save a body" was hotly criticized as evidence that he didn't appreciate the value of the CBC at all. As Lise Lareau, president of the Canadian Media Guild said in retort, "The regional network is the root of the CBC. It's not just a limb" (Cheadle 2000). Of course, what very few wanted to admit was that this regional network was hemorrhaging anyway. Ratings for local newscasts on the CBC were dismal everywhere but in Atlantic Canada. Meanwhile, private broadcasters like CTV and Global did have success with their local supertime news. This says something about CBC's inability to truly contend with local issues and speak directly to smaller communities while still maintaining a commitment to a nationalist ideal. Further, Rabinovitch's proposal was not to kill news altogether, but to replace local broadcasts with a national one in which fewer resources could go into a concentrated project. However, this was simply seen as another example of Toronto-centric, elite mastery over the airwaves that excluded the voice of the "every Canadian."

Surprisingly, even though the cuts to local news were spurred by major slashes to the CBC budget, Liberal politicians jumped onto the bandwagon and demanded that Rabinovitch back down from his decision. They did not, however, make any effort at all to consider reinstating the CBC budget, which had been slashed by nearly \$400 million since the 1980s. The CBC president was very publicly called on the carpet during parliamentary hearings into the controversy. After various wheelings and dealings, both behind and in front of the cameras, a compromise was reached. Local newscasts would not be cut altogether but trimmed to a half-hour supplement to a new, national broadcast called *Canada Now*, which would be very visibly not produced in Toronto, but rather in Vancouver. Late night newscasts would remain cancelled, replaced by a greater commitment to

nationally based arts and current affairs programming packaged with multiple broadcasts of *The National*. “Maybe we were a bit overzealous,” a chastened Rabinovitch confessed, although pundits noted that this compromise was an optical illusion, seeing as how it did nothing to address the budget crisis facing the CBC (McKay 2000). Nor, tellingly, did it confront the uncomfortable reality that viewers didn’t actually watch CBC local newscasts before and it was not clear if they would now with this revamped format. The important issue, therefore, isn’t so much what the CBC actually does for Canadians, but in maintaining appearances for what it is supposed to do. Clearly, the idea of the CBC is far more powerful than its reality.

CBC radio has long been able to balance national and local concerns by mixing programming throughout the day and producing national shows from across the country, not just in Toronto. Yet, with the small exception of *Canada Now*, for some reason that successful formula has been deemed too unwieldy or too expensive for the television network to follow suit. As a result, the CBC left itself open to justifiable criticism of what has been called its embedded Toronto-centrism. Certainly, it does seem like the concerns of Toronto play far more regularly as headline news than that of any other city or region. And, unlike the private broadcasters Global and CTV, CBC’s nightly newscast is not followed by a locally produced show. Interestingly, it is only recently that Global even ventured into the national news, preferring to focus its resources on locally produced shows. This is likely because local news has traditionally been much more successful than national news, particularly during the supper hour. A glance at the spring 2004 compiled more regional market ratings shows that locally produced news far outpaces national broadcasts. For example, in the Okanagan-Kamloops area, four of the five top-rated shows are local news, and only one national broadcast, *Global National*, appears in the top twenty, at number ten (BBM Canada 2004).

The importance of the local in information programming was driven home when *CityPulse at 6*, the news show produced by City-TV in Toronto, beat out both *The National* and *CTV News with Lloyd Robertson* for best news program at the 2004 Gemini Awards. The station, which is owned by CHUM, has also gone as far as to create a

twenty-four-hour news station dedicated almost exclusively to Toronto-based stories, rivalling both CBC's *Newsworld* and CTV's *Newsnet*. CBC's decision to eliminate regional newscasts seriously impacted the public broadcaster's reputation in informational programming. In fact, in 2004, at public hearings to debate renewing Rabinovich's contract, it was noted that his decision to cancel local news resulted in the loss of approximately 200,000 viewers to private broadcasters (Cobb 2004). It is fair to say that local news is a major factor in how Canadians choose to receive their television and has even mitigated the penetration of satellite services that have fewer local stations available for subscription. It is also fair to say that the CBC has never been able to clearly articulate a local vision for its network and as a result fails to resonate on anything other than an ideological level.

The demand for local information programming is just as pronounced when it comes to sports. Viewer affinities with sports teams run extremely high, and public participation in the success of a team motivates high degrees of viewer attention. The extended playoff run of the Calgary Flames in the 2004 NHL playoffs, for example, demonstrates how a city can become fixated on the success of a local team as ratings skyrocketed and national news agencies turned their cameras to the celebrations on the city's streets. Further, sports programming is one of the few areas in Canadian television where geographic specificity is genuinely respected. In the NHL playoffs, for example, the CBC and TSN tailor broadcasts to specific markets and when games featuring Canadian teams overlap, the national broadcast is split. While this can be a tremendous problem for fans of the Montreal Canadiens living in the west, who, for example, were denied the overtime of a Montreal/Boston playoff game in April 2004 so that the opening minutes of the Vancouver/Calgary game might be shown, attempts to target specific games to specific audiences are used to minimize the common critique of Toronto-centrism levelled at national sports broadcasters, in particular the CBC, whose commentators are regularly accused of a bias towards the Toronto Maple Leafs.

The importance of televised sports to the Canadian broadcasting model, and in particular the National Hockey League, was stressed in the fall of 2004 when league owners locked out the players in a

contract dispute. Unfortunately, for people like John Doyle who insist that hockey is the nationalist myth par excellence, the subsequent cancellation of the season exposed that myth to the ugly glare of reality. Despite all nostalgic references to hockey as integral to the national consciousness, interest in international, minor and women's league hockey did not receive a boost. While the three major cable sports networks, TSN, Sportsnet, and The Score, maneuvered to replace NHL broadcasts with AHL, world juniors, and European hockey broadcasts, the audience simply did not follow, causing one executive to lament, "The biggest myth in this country is that Canadians are dyed-in-the-wool hockey fans. That's a lie. They don't watch juniors. They don't attend junior games to a great degree. They don't watch the [American Hockey League], and you could say they don't watch NHL games involving U.S. teams. Just ask TSN about their numbers when the Leafs aren't playing" (Houston 2004a). The lack of audience for international hockey leagues, in which many NHL stars were now playing, demonstrated how resistant Canadians are to cultural change. Hockey was replaced on TSN with more basketball, lacrosse, and professional wrestling to anticipated lower ratings. The evening sports news shows also faced declining audiences on all three channels. The 10 p.m. news broadcast on Sportsnet, for example, saw its ratings fall from an average of 92,000 viewers in November 2003, to 40,000 during the lockout (Houston 2004a).

While a focus on the local team can be problematic for network programmers seeking to grow their audiences on a national scale, it highlights the fact that successful Canadian television is largely local information-based television. The CBC does well when it provides programming that is unavailable from foreign sources, such as hockey games featuring Canadian teams, and programming that appeals to specific local constituencies. Hockey fits that bill in a way unlike any other professional sport, not so much because it promotes a nationalist agenda but more because it is a part of local cultures. Similarly, regional Canadian sports like the CFL do particularly well in the prairie provinces where most of the teams are located. Curling, likewise, began as a regional, small-market sport played by semi-professionals who needed to hold regular fulltime jobs. However, since the Nagano

Winter Olympics in 1998, it has grown considerably on a national level.

Non-hockey sports broadcasting in Canada largely functions at a more niche level, rarely drawing audiences in the millions as the NHL playoffs routinely do. Major league baseball, for example, had no conventional broadcaster for World Series games in Canada from 1997 until 2003, when a deal was made with Craig Broadcasting to televise the games on the newly launched station, Toronto 1. Similarly, Craig Broadcasting acquired the rights to ABC's *Monday Night Football* when Global felt that they were not worth continuing, and the Toronto Raptors paid for time on Global Sunday afternoons, rather than being able to sell their rights. The problem comes from the enormous rights fees charged by the three largest American sports leagues, a situation that is financially imperilling even major American networks. Indeed, Fox lost \$900 million on sports broadcasting in 2002 (Zelkovich 2004b). Rights fees for major league sports are increasingly prohibitive for conventional network broadcasters who are unable to offset the fees with advertising revenue in an era in which audience fragmentation has meant lower ratings and higher difficulty in creating "event" television around sports. This tendency has had the effect of driving televised sports towards cable networks, which can subsidize the rights fees with their subscriber revenue even before a single ad is sold. More importantly, it points to the way that broadcasters are being forced to rethink their relationship to their audience and envision different economies based on localized, fragmented, and targeted demographics. This new reality has interesting repercussions, especially for multicultural informational programming, as is evidenced in the surprising success of Fox Sports World Canada.

The limited success of Fox Sports World Canada, the only one of seven digital sports channels to be doing even mildly well financially, has been attributed to their practice of showing live European soccer games. The channel averaged 78,000 viewers for its coverage of the Euro 2004 soccer tournament, although its primetime average usually hovers around 3,000. It seems that Fox has tapped into a market that other broadcasters have consistently overlooked in their aim to build mass audiences based on homogenous notions of Canadian sports

culture. The Portuguese-Canadian community, who watched the host team narrowly lose the Euro Cup to Greece, stressed the importance of being able to keep up with their local teams through grey market satellite at community centres and cafes. When the federal government threatened to clamp down on this exercise of multiculturalism in action through Bill C-2, which criminalized foreign satellite providers, the community publicly voiced their concern. The *Montreal Gazette* quoted Francisco Salvador, a Portuguese Canadian who regularly watched Portuguese soccer matches at a community centre in LaSalle: “If Bill C-2 closes that door, we would have to close. If we don’t have the television, we have nothing” (Thompson 2004).

As Toronto Maple Leaf games migrate away from Sportsnet and TSN to specialty digital services like Leafs TV, it seems clear that local sports programming will drive the adoption of digital channels and broadcasters must be better attuned to the particular interests of their audience. The hope among cable and satellite operators is that local and niche sports programming will convince people to purchase bundles of digital channels rather than simply the narrower option of a single channel. Because the games are time sensitive, do not regularly appear in competing media such as the internet or DVD, and attract highly loyal viewers, they are a primary driver for television programmers who will increasingly strive to balance large-scale attractions like the Grey Cup game against more focused narrowcast attractions like Portuguese league soccer. The example of local programming, far from suggesting that television audiences are interested only in their own back yard, actually proves that globalization in the form of heterogeneous media flows creates alternative forms of community that are no longer tied to a very narrow idea of territoriality but which provide a nexus around which immigrant and ethnic diaspora can circulate.

CONCLUSION

In addressing the way that a more global outlook on television programming can best respond to local needs, desires, and issues, the term which may come to many people's minds is "glocalization." A riff on the McLuhanist idea of the global village, glocalization refers to the ways that global media, technology, and finance have collapsed national and regional concerns to the point where they cease to be relevant, leaving the local as the primary site in which globalization is experienced. However, we do not want to go that far because it is clear not only in programming but also in the existing regulatory frameworks for Canadian television that some version of the national does still exist, perhaps nebulously, perhaps anxiously, but it is there nonetheless. To us, this is a good thing, as the eradication of national interests at this stage could lead toward the more homogenous form of globalization that Appadurai warns about. As he states, the problem of embedding global market forces into local production is that it exploits local labour, customs, and ideals in ways that conceal the real sources of financial and technological flows. In that sense, then, local production becomes little more than a fetish, offering the spectacle of difference and specificity but actually engineered by mammoth global interests who are orchestrating the identical process in locations around the globe (1990, 307). The *American Idol* juggernaut and the way it took Canada by storm can be seen as one example of this homogenizing form of globalization that succeeds through a fetishization of local interests.

Thus, instead of suggesting that Canadian television has become an outdated concept that fails to resonate with citizens of this country, it is more productive to consider how nationally oriented television programming can in fact disrupt the rather surreptitious mechanisms of glocalization. The key to unlocking the potential of Canadian television can be found in the prison walls of our obsession with American programming. Certainly, at this point in history there is no way that cable companies could simply remove CBS from Canadian airwaves, or deny Canadians their weekly dose of *Desperate Housewives* – shown with simultaneously substituted ads, of course. However, what if added

into the existing mix were more shows imported from other parts of the globe with closed caption subtitles, and other programming options that look over the cultural barricade that Canada seems to have built around itself? This is a risky proposition indeed, and one that requires creative cultural and business models by broadcasters and cable companies at national, regional, and local levels. The problem is, of course, that such a suggestion assumes smaller audience share, lower ratings overall, viewer fragmentation, and other problems which are driving advertising revenue and overall profits down. However, it cannot be denied that this process is happening anyway. Furthermore, the response of broadcasters to this problem hasn't been an opening up of the airwaves and a re-thinking of the potential of the disjunctured audience to build new markets, but a retrenchment into traditional models of broadcasting with the rather shrill insistence that the CRTC back them up in the name of national unity. Yet, a glance at Canadian Heritage's website shows clearly that the responsibility of the cultural regulatory agency is not merely to protect private industry from its own faltering business model but to build the conditions for a thriving national culture based on multiculturalism and openness to diversity. That is the promise of a future Canadian television, and it is one that is taking shape even without the support of industry and government. While there are still some who cling to the belief that the mediascape can still somehow be contained, advances in the technological flow of television have made it easier and easier to simply bypass the national broadcasting system with its carefully constructed schedule and transform not just what Canadians watch but when and how. The obsolescence of the network broadcasting model is not the stuff of the future but is increasingly a daily reality brought about by the combination of multiculturalism and new digital technologies.