



CANADIAN TELEVISION TODAY
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C O N C L U S I O N

When the CRTC considered adding Aljazeera to the list of optional broadcast channels available to Canadian cable and satellite companies, they received more than twice as many comments in favour of the move as those opposed to it. Nonetheless, the regulator made an unusual decision about Aljazeera that they had to know would effectively remove the channel from Canadian airwaves, while at the same time gesturing hollowly at their own open-mindedness. This was a coldly calculated, some would say blatantly racist, decision, which manipulated a rhetoric of multiculturalism in order to undermine the aspirations of Canada's Arabic population. By way of contrast, the CRTC humbly backed down from its ruling against RAI International, after receiving thousands of complaints – including from Italian Canadian politicians. Some will point to the example of RAI International as evidence that the CRTC is willing to listen and adapt to the changing realities of Canadian society. However, we see it as really two sides of the same coin. RAI was ultimately incorporated into the Canadian television spectrum because it was politically inoffensive, while Aljazeera remained politically fraught. The only criticism of RAI was that it would interfere with the profit margin of a major Canadian media conglomerate, Corus. In this sense, then, the change of heart over RAI International, in the context of an entrenched attitude of suspicion toward a news and current affairs channel from the Middle East, highlights the problematic way in which multiculturalism is mediated on television so that it remains banal, inoffensive, and non-threatening.

Taken together, the CRTC decisions against Aljazeera and in favour of RAI speak to the embedded paternalism of the CRTC, but also to its increasing irrelevance. While the CRTC still aims to control Canadian culture by curtailing access to the technology, Canadian audiences are finding innovative ways to bypass television's cultural, technological, and regulatory framework in order to make the medium more responsive and meaningful to their lives. With an entire regulatory infrastructure built to protect private Canadian broadcasting interests, many of whom are presumed to be uncompetitive in a free market setting, the CRTC is unable to conceptualize the audience as anything other than a problem to be regulated. Indeed, as Richard Collins has argued, "Such terms as 'consumer sovereignty' and 'audience satisfaction' rarely enter into Canadian broadcasting policy discourse" (1990, 81). That said, we do not subscribe to the model of consumer sovereignty or choice propounded by the Conservative party and the cable industry, because it is based on a "majority rule" system that privileges massive media conglomerates, homogenous programming, and keeps power tightly in the hands of industry instead of audience. It is for these reasons that we still cling – somewhat romantically some might say – to a notion of the nation as a gatekeeper of culture. Normally, that image suggests a carefully guarded portal that is rarely opened. In our case, we envision it being kept wide open but regulating the concentration of flows to ensure that minority voices are heard and become increasingly louder and steadier. Thus, we state categorically here that it is time to place the audience at the centre, rather than the periphery, of broadcasting policy in Canada.

We believe that the Canadian television audience is not a problem to be solved, but a promise to be kept. As a nation dedicated to the principles inherent in multiculturalism, it is time for Canada to step up to the consequences of those principles by enabling social and cultural difference, rather than trying to regulate it out of existence. This means opening up Canadian television to genuine programming difference and embracing new technologies that will support a fractured, fragmented vision of culture. Television, arguably the most significant mass medium of the previous century, could well prove to be an important harbinger of a postmodern mediascape in which heterogeneity,

disjuncture, and difference flow. Unlike the internet, which still has marginal penetration compared to broadcasting, or film, where the viewing practices of its audience have left it a poor cousin in the convergence market, television has a unique combination of regulatory, cultural, and technological features that suggests it rightly belongs at the centre of the media convergence. Indeed, the transformations of satellite and computer technology are already bringing the internet and film together on the home television screen. The film industry has begun to notice that for a large portion of the audience watching a film is no different than watching television. Evidence of this fact mounts as audiences fail to materialize in the theatres, opting to watch at home on DVD, specialty movie channels, or through digital connections to peer-to-peer networks. Already, industry leaders such as Wayne Clarkson, the head of Telefilm, and Viviane Reding, the European Union's commissioner for media, are discussing alternate distribution systems that will give smaller market films a chance on the global stage. In a presentation to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage's hearings on the film industry, Clarkson argued that Canadian film needs to stop measuring success against Hollywood box office and start looking for new opportunities, especially in specialty television and digital services ("Seek success" 2005). This is a golden opportunity for cultural producers, cable industry, and broadcasters alike. Yet while other media look forward, the one with the most to gain and the most to lose if it doesn't take action, stares forlornly at an imagined past of captive, passive audiences and a benign, industry-friendly regulatory system that invokes the sentimental dream of a nation that keeps refusing to come into existence, no matter how hard it tries.

For generations, television has been a medium whose primary use in Canada has been the construction of a normative national sentiment rooted in white, western, masculinist traditions. *Hockey Night in Canada* is perhaps the clearest example of this, and the fact that Don Cherry, a hockey commentator known for his racist and sexist remarks, is the best-known public face of the national broadcaster is demonstrative of how little interest Canadian television mandarins have in multiculturalism generally. A new model of television, and a model that will allow Canada to thrive culturally, must be based on destabilizing

this hegemony by integrating white, western traditions within multiculturalism, rather than vice versa. The dream of Canadian broadcasters seems to have been to restrict the choices offered to audiences. The ideal for private broadcasters is large, captive audiences with no competition from within or from abroad. At the same time, however, Canadian audiences have long understood television through a sense of lack. Canada is the country where HBO and The Disney Channel are unavailable. Canada is the country where RAI International was unavailable. Canadian television is something that has been defined as much by its absences as by its presences, and Canadian viewers have long clamoured for more channels, more choices, more programming. This demand has been met in a limited fashion. Niche channels such as The Golf Channel or The Food Network have served to help fragment the audience across an array of hobbies and interests. Yet demands from multicultural audiences to further splinter the broadcasting model along linguistic and cultural lines are opposed by the CRTC, which clings to a protectionist broadcasting model, allowing only incremental change while attempting to shore up faltering Canadian broadcasting companies.

Increasingly, technological changes and growing frustration from the audience are transforming the playing field, leaving the traditional players scrambling with a weak defence. It is a system badly in need of fixing, increasingly at odds with its own stated agendas – both culturally to enhance tolerance, diversity, and openness to other cultures, and economically through the drive toward globalization and international markets. Yet, more than any other medium, television has a tight hold on nostalgia for Canadian national identity and cultural sovereignty as a dream perpetually deferred. It is time to acknowledge that television's greatest achievements cannot be met through the coordination of a homogenized, mass audience but must be accomplished through its ability to mediate multiculturalism as a conduit for images, narratives, and languages from around the globe. We are not suggesting that this is an easy transition, nor that audiences will eagerly abandon *American Idol* for the *Eurovision Song Contest*. Yet, signs abound that Canadians are not as closed-minded as some may prefer to characterize them. The work of globalization is already taking place

behind the scenes through international co-productions, as cultural producers become acutely aware that their programs need to attract international markets. Even in such banal examples as *The Amazing Race*, which ended the 2004/05 television season as the most popular program in Canada, there is the hint that audiences are drawn to shows that reveal heretofore unknown cultures, albeit in exoticized, “othered” ways. Ultimately, just as the cultural mavens of the past envisioned television as a way to inculcate citizens into a tightly defined version of Canadian identity, we are agreeing with them in a back-handed fashion. We concur that television is an important medium for the construction of identities and public cultures. The trick is to play to its strengths as a medium of multiplicity and multiculturalism, not homogeneity and hegemonic nationalism.

The new television technologies that we discussed in Chapter Three – the DVD, the DVR, and peer-to-peer network file-sharing – hold the possibility to radically transform the regulatory framework that we discussed in Chapter One. The end result is likely to be a complete reframing of Canadian television programming. Nonetheless, the CRTC has been slow to respond to these new technological innovations, allowing them to transform television largely in a regulatory vacuum. While lawsuits and appeals are endlessly being filed to stop these technologies from proliferating unchecked, particularly around the issue of copyright, it has yet to be acknowledged that these transformations have done more to decentralize television and open the medium up to a plurality of voices than any number of regulatory initiatives could have. Television is flowering internationally, and Canadians have the means to access the best television programming from around the globe, putting us on the cutting edge of a major media transformation. More importantly, all Canadians increasingly have access to television of their own choosing, and programming that speaks to their own interests and concerns.

The technological transformation in which we find ourselves carries with it a genuine possibility of redefining our national culture so that it accords with our stated national principles in practice, not merely in theory. For years, Canadian regulators have stymied the growth of a truly multicultural television industry in this country,

always using the threat of American cultural imperialism as the excuse. For Canadian television, American cultural imperialism is the great lie. In protecting Canadians from American television, the CRTC has provided Canadian networks with crutches like simultaneous substitution, which have all but guaranteed the dominance that the regulator ostensibly has sought to minimize. It is time to wake up to the fact of this lie, and reorient the way that Canadians think about television serving the interests of the nation.

This will require several important changes. First, it is time to acknowledge that the status quo is failing Canadians. As far back as 1995, Elisabeth Ostiguy pointed out that the current regulatory framework “was not designed for the new digital and interactive world of communications. Rules that once made good sense are rapidly being overtaken by events. These include Canadian content quotas, access guidelines for new specialty services, protectionist measures like simultaneous substitution, whether and how discretionary cable services should be regulated, the limitations against telephone company involvement in video distribution, and many others” (1995). Sadly, the regulatory situation has changed little since in the intervening decade, and the problems identified by Ostiguy have only become more acute. One change that could have a dramatic impact on the creation of a healthy indigenous broadcast culture rooted in the local would be the elimination of simultaneous substitution policies. Canadian broadcasters succeed in those instances when they use their local knowledge to produce material that Canadians want to see, whether this is *Hockey Night in Canada* or the evening newscast. Canadian broadcasters have a competitive advantage rooted in their understanding of local conditions and local markets, and they should be encouraged to develop these advantages by removing the crippling crutch of simultaneous substitution.

Second, Canada should cast wide its doors and welcome in as much third-language broadcasting as possible, ideally with available French and English subtitles so that foreign-language programming can have the widest possible impact across Canada. We agree with Rebecca Goldfarb that “Globalization requires a further move away from Canada’s protectionist impulses and a greater move toward the international outlook stated in the 1995 Foreign Policy Review,”

because, realistically, the inward-looking orientation of the current regulatory framework has utterly failed to create a national broadcasting system that accurately reflects this nation (1997, 43). Chinese films, Spanish novels, and even Japanese comic books are all widely available to Canadian cultural consumers, but television, that highly regulated medium, is increasingly the subject of a problematic foreign-language gap. That is unsupportable. Canada should be opening up its television industry to foreign-language broadcasters, not only because the internet and grey market satellites make it economically necessary, but because it is the right thing to do in a nation that claims to champion multiculturalism. Canadian broadcasters should be embracing niche programming for everyone, not simply for golfers and aspiring chefs.

If Canada is to do more than provide lip service to multiculturalism, it is necessary to rethink the relationship between the local, the national, and the global. It is incumbent on Canadian television producers to more actively engage in local programming, rather than attaching themselves to American exports that are already made available in this country by border stations. Canadian television networks cannot content themselves with being simple rebroadcasters of American content, or changing television technologies will make them irrelevant. This is not simply an argument about how Canadian television stations should proceed in an ideal world, but a recognition that the traditional broadcasting model is rapidly collapsing, and that without radical changes Canadian networks are in a poor position to deal with the change. At the same time, Canada must increase its embrace of the global cultural networks. Canada has long prided itself on the welcome that it offers immigrants from around the world, and the country should be justly proud of its efforts to integrate diasporic communities. At the same time, much more needs to be done. If Canadians are serious when they discuss the country as a mosaic rather than a melting pot, then legitimate and constructive efforts to open up the country to diverse cultures need to be made. Canada should throw its television culture open to the world in order to better serve the cultural needs of all of its citizens.

These changes – an increasing attention to the local coupled with a genuine welcoming of the global – would have the end result of helping to redefine the national culture of Canada in important and unpredictable ways. By placing the local and the global in a new dynamic relationship with each other, and by embracing difference, diversity, and plurality in more critical and socially grounded ways, the possibility emerges to create new understandings of our national culture that move beyond a reductionist relationship of Canada to the United States and England. Canada can no longer cling to definitions of nationalism rooted in nineteenth-century beliefs but must embrace doubt, difference, and diversity as the new models of nation-building. If Canadian television can be understood as AmericaPlus because of the way that it offers most of what is available south of us plus additional programming, then it is time to acknowledge that the possibility exists to turn Canadian television into GlobalPlus, by relegating American television to simply one option within an overall structure of multinational and multicultural offerings. As the central carrier of culture in this country, television is an important locus of social and cultural values. It is time that the country reshapes it to better reflect those values that have long been held to be the defining features of this nation.

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What's on TV? *In Canadian Television Today*, authors Bart Beaty and Rebecca Sullivan explore the current challenges and issues facing the English-language television industry in Canada.

Television in Canada has long been one of the principal conduits of national identity. But has it kept pace with the rapidly changing landscape of Canadian culture? After presenting an overview of the main issues and debates surrounding the Canadian small screen, Beaty and Sullivan offer their suggestions for the future of the medium. They argue that in today's globalized world, Canadian television should be a more fitting reflection of Canada's multicultural society, embracing a broader range of languages, cultures, and viewing strategies. Visualizing the potential reach of a revitalized industry, Beaty and Sullivan convincingly illustrate the promise and possibility of Canadian television that serves the cultural needs of all its citizens.

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