Media, Nationalism and Identity in Canada and Quebec[1]

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Introduction

By European standards, the struggles surrounding nationalism in Canada have been relatively peaceful and benign. But it is precisely the civility of the debate on the evolution of the Canadian political space that makes the role of media in that debate so important and interesting to look at.

There are a number of ways to approach this question. At one level, it is a question of representation. To the chagrin of the politicians, the vision of Canada fostered by the Canadian media does not fit with any conventional set of easily malleable political structures. Canada, as seen through the media, does not look the same in English and in French. Canada as seen, through the media, from its various regions does not look the same as it does from the centre (or centres). Canada as seen, through the media, from the north, does not look the same as it does from the south. Canada as seen, through the media, does not look the same when one is a First Nations person growing up on a reserve in northern Manitoba, a sixteenth generation descendant of the original colonists of New France, the great-great-grandchild of United Empire Loyalists, or an individual with the flight from oppression in Vietnam, Uganda or Chile still fresh in family memory. Canadian politics is, in fact, characterized by a "dialectic of misunderstanding" (Taylor, 1993: 141), that is reflected in the media.

Yet most media *policy* in Canada has been aimed at making a certain conception of Canada work, at strengthening the centre and promoting cohesion of an autonomous political entity north of the 49th parallel, while minimizing the pressures towards fragmentation and disintegration inherent in the historical Canadian experience (see, for ex., Raboy, 1990). It is unfortunate that more serious attention has not been paid, during Canada's constitutional debate, to the substantive issues of media, culture and communications. Because these are, in often unrecognized ways, umbrella issues, not only important in and of themselves, but in the very process of defining nationhood that the debate is all about.

Events have shown that it is impossible to codify the unifying features of Canada - "a land of crumbling empires and scrambled signals" (Patterson, 1990: 20). Canada's best efforts at constitution-writing show that all that can be codified are relations of power. That was the lesson of the 1982 repatriation of the Canadian constitution from Britain, and the ensuing decade of failed attempts to tinker with that document and make it reflect the political realities of nationhood in Canada.

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In the 1990s, as in the broader historical context, debate over the institutional arrangements of culture and communications have been central to the efforts to define and implement an operating definition of Canada. The most sustained, consistent, and now threatening opposition to this grand design has come from the challenge of a viable alternative political project in Quebec (Chossudovsky, 1995).

In addition to fostering Canadian cultural sovereignty vis à vis the United States, Canadian media policy has also focused on making the idea of political independence for Quebec unnecessary or unattractive, by inciting the promotion of national unity. Canada thus has fully developed media systems in English and French, in both public and private sectors (Raboy, 1992). Regulated media industries are supervised by the federal government, however, and provinces are virtually absent. Direction and orientation are thus determined centrally, and tend to focus on questions of high national interest - such as how to keep the country together.

Federally regulated and subsidized activities such as broadcasting, film production, many artistic endeavours and telecommunications thus become contested areas. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Canadian culture is the struggle for survival and flourishing of francophone culture, based primarily in the territory of Quebec. The relationship between culture and political structures becomes particularly significant in this context.

I. Forms of Cultural Métissage

When the contradiction between national unity and fragmentation is high on the political agenda, controversies tend to abound, usually about the role of federally funded projects in consciously or unconsciously promoting disunity and *québécois* national consciousness. This should not be surprising. The tension between centralization and local autonomy, between dominant and resistant cultures (manifested in the linguistic cleavage between English and French), between economic and political structures on the one hand and value-based social practices on the other are features of the changing nature of modern societies in the context of globalization. The role of national identity is shifting with the changing role of the state; but identity relations and political relations are not changing as quickly as one might think (See, for ex., Anderson, 1986; Pietersee, 1994; Barber, 1995).

One of the salient features of globalization is that people are called on to choose their affiliations and categories of identification - to mould an identity as it were. Thus, it is entirely possible to live in the centre of Montreal and consider oneself "Québécois" or "Canadian", independently of one's linguistic or ethnic origin. But the evolution towards various forms of cultural métissage or hybridisation make a certain confusion inevitable. It also means that self-determination has given way to interdependence. Nationalism is no longer strictly a movement of liberation from external oppression, it is also an expression of domination of a local majority over its dependent minorities.

The recent (October 1995) Quebec referendum on sovereignty highlighted these considerations. Quebec premier Jacques Parizeau's widely reported referendum night comment that the Quebec "We" was defeated by "money and the ethnic vote" underscored the fragility of the Québécois national project. Parizeau's speech was an unforgettable television moment. Transmitted live and unfiltered

into millions of homes, it was immediately, and in subsequent days, followed by interpretation and punditry that demonstrated the extent to which media speak to people's preconceived notions and sociocultural situations. Like the U.S. trial of O.J. Simpson, which revealed the cleavages in American society through the race-based interpretations of the meaning of a media event, the Quebec referendum showed how a society's defining moments can take on different meanings for members of its different constituent groups.

Indeed, Quebec and Canada enjoyed a moment of global media glory in the final days of October 1995, as the build-up to the referendum topped the CNN World Report over a period of two or three days, even bumping Russian President Boris Yeltsin's heart attack at one point (observers of Quebec and Canadian politics are prone to notice such things).

Internally, the referendum provided the most recent example of the extent to which the media of Canada's two linguistic solitudes foster parallel and often non-intersecting, rather exclusive notions of nationhood, national identity and nationalism in the onetime French and British colonies of northern North America.

In the wake of the referendum, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, a Quebec-born francophone who has built a successful political career battling Quebec nationalism from within the federal Liberal Party, accused the French network service of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation / Radio-Canada of "separatist bias", sparking a flurry of speculation about the government's interest in maintaining support for the financially beleaguered national public broadcaster. But an independent study of the CBC/Radio-Canada's referendum news coverage concluded that while the two networks saw the story through completely different filters, one could not call this a political bias (Erin Research, 1995).

At year's end, the traditional New Year's Eve comedy satires on both Radio-Canada and CBC were littered with tasteless, quasi-racist gags featuring stereotyped depictions of the other language group. The result was an undermining of public faith in the ability of public broadcasting, and media generally, to contribute to lifting Canada and Quebec out of the quagmire into which they seemed to be sinking.

It's an old story - like the never-ending unresolved national question itself - but it takes on a new colouring in the context of the restructuring of national and global media politics and the changing role of media (See Raboy, 1996).

II. The National Question

The interesting point about Canada and Quebec, however, is that structural linguistic parallelism has been deliberately built into the media system from the beginning to reflect the realities of Canada, and as part of a political strategy to preserve the coherence of the Canadian state.

The national question in Canada is an extremely complex issue aimed at defining and preserving an independent political entity against the centrifugal tendencies of North American continental integration and *at the same time* at developing structures for an internal accommodation in which different perceptions of nationhood and national identity must coexist.

Media have traditionally played a crucial role in this process, and public policy with respect to media, as well as the public debates surrounding media, have consequently taken on great importance in the Canadian political culture.

For about seventy years, Canadian policy in culture and communication has been one of the main arenas for playing out the paradoxical issues arising from the national question. A succession of Royal commission reports have included some of the best efforts at making Canada work. Resulting legislation, programs and day-to-day policies have reflected more mundane, sometimes partisan concerns.

Basically, inevitably, the institutions and practices of Canadian communications have reflected the inconsistencies of Canada rather than the national unity designs of their architects. In the strongest, most positive sense, they have fostered a dualistic view. There is nothing wrong with this, and one would think that it should be tapped as a source of strength, but instead Canadians continue to struggle against it.

For example, conflicting interpretations of who spends how much on what in culture and communication has provided some of the less edifying material in the constitutional debate. Thus, according to a study done for the Quebec ministry of cultural affairs, Quebec financed arts and culture to the tune of $ 482 million in 1990, while in the same year, Ottawa spent $ 283 million in Quebec, *excluding* the part of CBC operations that could be attributed to Quebec. When one factors in this amount - an estimated $ 450 million - one can begin to appreciate both the nature of such *guerres des chiffres*, as well as the centrality of broadcasting to federal cultural strategy with respect to the national question (see Raboy, 1992: 112-114 and 128-132).

III. Contradictions in Cultural and Broadcasting Policies

This strategy is thirty years old, and stems from the federal government's creation, in 1964, of a cabinet committee on cultural affairs as part of its approach to dealing with the perceived menacing rise of nationalism in Quebec. The minister responsible for federal cultural policy outlined the role of the CBC, for example, in a speech in the House of Commons on November 13, 1964:

> *"The CBC is one of Canada's most vital and essential institutions at this crucial moment of our history. The CBC must become a living and daily testimony of the Canadian identity, a faithful reflection of our two main cultures and a powerful element of understanding, moderation and unity in our country. If it performs these national tasks with efficiency, its occasional mistakes will be easily forgotten; if it fails in that mission, its other achievements will not compensate for that failure" (Canada, 1964-65: 10084, cited in Raboy, 1990: 160).*

From then on, the government has frequently and aggressively recalled its expectations of the national public broadcaster with regard to national unity, writing them into the Broadcasting Act in 1968, initiating an (ultimately inconclusive) investigation into alleged pro-separatist bias in news coverage following the election of a pro-sovereignty government in Quebec in 1976, repeatedly summoning CBC executives to justify corporate policy. This obligation was removed from the Act in 1991 - but that did not prevent the prime minister's previously mentioned outburst in the wake of the 1995 vote.

The mechanics of dualism in Canadian broadcasting constituted an important aspect of a major broadcasting policy review undertaken in 1986, and culminating in a new Broadcasting Act in 1991. In the framework of reduced available

public funding, attention was drawn to the need to close the gap between mo-ney earmarked for French- or English-language CBC production. Here, the full essence of the Canadian dilemma could be appreciated. The CBC budget is an opaque document that begs for interpretation, but no matter how you read it, the linguistic breakdown indicates that budget allocation is based neither on de-mographics nor on pure application of the principle of dualism - oscillating around 37 %, it is a solution characteristic of the compromise that is Canada. [1]

In the process leading up to the new broadcasting legislation, Quebec-based lobby groups succeeded in including a provision that CBC programming should "strive to be of equivalent quality" in English and in French - a neat peg on which to hang arguments for more money. Taken together with the emphasis on ling-uistic asymmetry that was equally part of the new context, however, the *textual* provisions of the new policy did not prevent the creation of new aberrations, such as the informational inequality that resulted from introduction, in 1988, of a CBC cable television all-news service in English only. The problem was finally correc-ted in 1995 when the CBC introduced an equivalent French-language service.

The contradictions in Canadian cultural policy are so hazardous that neither federalists nor sovereignists dared venture directly onto this slippery terrain du-ring the 1995 referendum campaign. The bottom line is that, having developed a series of strong, centralized national cultural institutions, mandated to oversee and promote the flourishing of two national cultures, in English and in French, federal cultural policy has fostered and supported two visions of Canada and the world. Paradoxically, it is considered to have been more successful at fostering the *québécois alter ego* to a certain monocentric vision of Canada, than at un-derscoring the Canadian difference with respect to the United States. In some views, this is seen as a problem. A 1994 brief to a parliamentary committee stu-dying the CBC from the pro-sovereignty Union des artistes highlighted the para-dox:

> *"Radio-Canada contributed to developing not a homogeneousness within a community in search of solutions, but a strong identity respecting the diver-sity of ideas and positions regarding the solutions available to them. This identity, this awareness did not, let's say, please everyone, and from this point of view Radio-Canada was perhaps the victim of its own success" (cited in Canada, 1995a: 94).*

The meaning of 'Canada' and 'Quebec'

In October 1994, the Canadian Parliament debated a bill to establish the De-partment of Canadian Heritage, a new government ministry which would conso-lidate a variety of activities aimed, in the words of minister Michel Dupuy, at "pro-moting Canadian identity." The new ministry would combine such activities as communications, cultural industries, language policy, national parks and histo-

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1 The population of Quebec, including non-francophones, is about 25% of the total Canadian population. The total francophone population of Canada, including francop-hones outside Quebec, is also about 25%. The historic basis of Canada, however, is the equality of the French and English languages, and a strong argument has been made for allocating cultural budgets according to this principle: for example, it costs as much to produce a national news broadcast or a dramatic series in either language, the argument goes, so allocating budgets on the basis of demographics would mean an inferior level of service in French.

ric sites, amateur sport and multiculturalism. The keyword in the name of the new ministry, 'heritage', the minister stated, refers to "the set of signs that enable us to recognize ourselves as individuals who belong to a group or even a country" (Canada, 1994: 6416).

The sovereignist critic on cultural policy, Suzanne Tremblay, saw things differently. [2] First, she pointed out, the administrative reorganization and merging of several departments leading to the creation of "Heritage" was a primarily economic operation, "unacceptable both for Canadians and for Quebecers". Regarding the proposed division of jurisdictional responsibilities between the departments of Heritage and Industry, she pointed out that the bill put the minister of Heritage in charge of content "while his colleague from Industry will be in charge of the means required... In other words, the former will be responsible for culture, while the latter will look after the business side of things." This aspect, she added "makes us fear the worst as regards the future of Canadian culture".

Tremblay's strongest words were reserved for the part of her critique that scrutinized the bill through the prism of Quebec nationalism. The bill, she noted, "shamelessly infringes on what so far has been considered provincial jurisdiction: culture" ÜCanada, 1994: 6419]. In this respect, it underscored "the steadfast obstinacy of the Canadian government in refusing to recognize the distinctiveness of Quebec society". More specifically, she framed her argument in these terms:

> *"Under a Canadian federalism, English Canada has the right to defend its culture against the American invader, but Quebec should drop its own culture... They want to make us all one nation and deny there are two. There are two nations in this country, and the act to establish the Department of Canadian Heritage should reflect an awareness of the situation in Quebec and the flexibility that Quebec needs to develop and prosper" (Canada, 1994: 6421).*

Now the problem here lies in the type of meaning one ascribes to the constructs 'Canada' and 'Quebec'. 'Canada' generally refers to the set of political institutions that have evolved since 1867, and until further notice, includes Quebec. 'Quebec', on the other hand, is used far more ambiguously, and depending on the context, its meaning can range from referring to an unproblematic component part of Canada all the way to a putative separate state. Most of the time it is somewhere in between, and reflects the tension of the unresolved aspects of the national question in both Canada and Quebec - as I think a close textual reading of Tremblay's statement makes clear.

Indeed, there is a strong claim to be made that there are far more than two nations in Canada (see Dossier, 1995), and here we have to consider the link between political structures and symbolic constructs. 'Canada' in its simplest sense refers to an existing political structure. Linguistic duality in Canada's cultural policy has been the result of a (rather successful, I think) strategy for accommodating the most serious threats to that political structure on the basis of conflicting views of nationhood within Canada. The strong federalist attachments of French Canadians outside Quebec and English Canadians within Quebec is evidence of this. On the other hand, this aspect of federal cultural policy has also led to frustration among the two linguistic majorities: the francophone majority within Que-

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2   Since 1993, a majority of Quebec Members of Parliament in Ottawa represent the sovereignist Bloc Québécois. As the second largest party in Parliament, the Bloc is thus in the highly paradoxical position of official opposition in the pan-Canadian parliament.

bec would like political control over the instruments of French-language cultural development - hence the demand for repatriating jurisdiction over culture and communications to the province; elsewhere in Canada, the anglophone majority feels it is unduly subsidizing French-language culture.

IV. The Leitmotif of Canadian Cultural Policy

Meanwhile, political trafficking has been the leitmotif of Canadian cultural policy, where the accommodation of francophone demands is used alternatively as a bargaining chip with nationalist politicians and a carrot dangled before the francophone public in order to buy its support (or, at least, passive submission).

As a result, another paradox of Canadian cultural politics is the realization that a sovereign Quebec would have more political control but over less resources than are presently available to francophone culture (assuming that a sovereign Quebec would attribute a similar proportion of public funds to cultural spending).

On the other hand, there may be a more significant basis for differentiating between Ottawa and Quebec as prospective policymakers with regard to communication. Historically, various authors have noted the preponderant attention paid to the state and to public institutions as motors of social and cultural development in both Canada and Quebec (for ex., Hardin, 1974; McRoberts and Posgate, 1980). In the current climate of fiscal retrenchment, analysts have remarked that Quebec, almost alone among Canadian provincial and federal governments, continues to promote a relatively social-democratic attitude towards the role of the state.

In the area of communication, this distinction emerges in recent policy proposals regarding the establishment of the new information infrastructures known metaphorically as the "information highway". A September 1995 report from the federal Information Highway Advisory Council (Canada, 1995b) embraced "a pro-marketplace thrust" (Surtees, 1995) so prominent that the only non-business representative on the advisory council, Canadian Labour Congress vice-president Jean-Claude Parrot, felt compelled to dissent. Among other things, the report recommended making competition the driving force on the information highway and liberalizing foreign ownership requirements in broadcasting and telecommunications (while maintaining the traditional emphasis on Canadian content and public broadcasting as promoters of Canadian culture and identity.) The key idea, repeated in several places in the report's 227 pages, was this: "In the new information economy, success will be determined by the marketplace, not by the government" (Canada, 1995b: x).

Meanwhile, with somewhat less fanfare, a Quebec report on the same subject was published two months earlier, in July 1995. Here, the emphasis was on the information highway's potential impact on education, health care and social services, the promotion of language and culture, the organisation of public services and, residually, the development of industry and export markets. Under "equality of access", one read: "It is necessary to guarantee the right to information and knowledge for all citizens, without regard to their financial resources or their language of use, in order to avoid the division of Quebec society into two groups, those who have access to the information highway and those who do not" (Quebec, 1995: v).

This is not to deny the obvious benefits to industry of such a policy, for as the report continued to say: "Facilitating accessibility in fact constitutes a way of stimulating demand for products and services" (Quebec, 1995: 37). Indeed, like its

Ottawa counterpart, the Quebec committee that drew up this report was top-heavy with major industry players (some, like André Chagnon of the cable giant Vidéotron and Charles Sirois of Teleglobe Inc., served on both councils, providing an interesting example of the way the present constitutional arrangement enables some to butter their bread on both sides.) But the difference could be read in passages in which the Quebec report developed notions such as the idea that building the information infrastructure should be seen as a "social investment", whose economic benefits would be reaped by future generations (Quebec, 1995: 42-43).

Characteristically, most of the legal and regulatory instruments required to orient the emerging technological environment remain under Ottawa's jurisdiction. Thus, while the federal government indeed has the power to act on its advisors' report, the Quebec report included the necessary recommendation that the Quebec government "use all means available to see that federal laws and policies regarding the information highway not only recognize the cultural specificity of Quebec but also allow Quebec to develop and reinforce it" (Quebec, 1995: 33).

Conclusion

In an age of globalization, one may be tempted to marvel at proposals that are contingent on a more active role for the state. But public attitudes towards collective institutions surely rank among the most significant markers of cultural distinction, and just as Canadians generally identify their social safety net, gun control and the CBC as characteristics that distinguish Canada from the United States, the Québécois continue to define their difference in terms of the French language, the decentralisation of powers and the role of the state as the motor of social, economic and cultural development.

It is not likely that under the present federal structure Ottawa will relinquish any significant power to Quebec in the area of communication. But, regardless of Quebec's choice with respect to political sovereignty, its manifestations of cultural difference will not disappear. This is why it is clear that short of a radical constitutional restructuring, the dilemmas and incoherencies of Canadian media politics are going to remain for the foreseeable future.

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Summary: Media, Nationalism and Identity in Canada and Quebec

The relationship between media, nationalism and identity is increasingly problematic, even in the most politically stable countries. In Canada, media policy has been an integral part of political strategies for preserving the coherence of the Canadian state, with respect to external pressures towards North American continental integration, and internal pressures towards fragmentation and, most recently, disintegration. The alternative project of political independence for Quebec, which nearly achieved a majority in a referendum held in October 1995, represents a threat to the Canadian state that media policy has sought to contain. But media practices reflect the real tensions in Canadian society and can not be held to account for the more or less failed agendas of politicians. The article explores some aspects of the relationship between media and the complexities of national identity in the framework of a political culture where different visions of nationhood must inevitably coexist.