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Viewers on Television. Between Policies and Uses

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Viewers on Television: Between Policy and Uses

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Abstract

Drawing policy studies and audience studies closer together requires that the individual be conceptualized as the subject of both political and media apparatuses. This article explores such a conceptualization in the Quebec context, working with a group of activist viewer-citizens to evaluate the content and form of the television programming available to them, on one hand, and the usefulness of some key Canadian broadcast policies, on the other. Examining the respondents' media practices and expectations, the article highlights how expectations for public television are set against increasingly blurred divisions between public and private television; individualist media usage; and the pertinence of Canadian broadcasting law in this unfolding media system. By situating media use within a broader set of social practices that affect and are affected by state policy, the article seeks to contribute to an understanding of social demand in communication policy.

Technological and economic shifts in the field of communication have turned governments toward new policy and regulatory regimes, at both national and international levels (McQuail and Siune, 1998). In the case of broadcast media --- television, particularly --- these regimes require that the notion of *public interest* be revisited. The designs of both entrepreneurs and public authorities intersect in the construction of television viewers, making viewers at once targets of strategic programs and agents in the transformation of the media environment. In binding the analysis of television uses to the evaluation of broadcast policy, our goal is to intervene precisely at that point of intersection (Proulx, 1998; Raboy, 1990; Raboy et al., 2001).

In the past, both policymakers and researchers have tended to separate these two types of research. Broadcast policy evaluation has remained relatively indifferent to qualitative research on the social reception of media, especially television. Well-documented studies --- for example, Machet and Robillard's work at the European Institute of Communication (1998) --- rarely dip into the scientific literature on media reception. Audience reception studies, similarly, tend not to integrate media's legal and political contexts into their analytic frameworks, as Tony Bennett has pointed out (1992). Our intervention is an attempt to address this gap.

The Context of Audience Studies

Audience studies' contribution has not been simply to position the television viewer as active --- this had already been well-established by the uses and gratifications approach (Blumler and Katz, 1974) --- but also to position the mediated message, or text, within a process of semantic production undertaken through an encounter with the viewer, or reader. Locating the viewer as the reader of a television text has meant studying the text-reader encounter carefully, and so reception studies have leaned toward qualitative approaches allowing finely-grained descriptions of the process. Early on, the so-called Columbia School had already identified viewers' individual attitudes and opinions as a key factor in the play of media influence, but it would not be until the mid-1970s and 1980s that researchers identifying with Birmingham's cultural studies tradition (for ex. Ang, 1989; Hall, 1973/1980; Morley, 1980) would address this question of reception in depth --- and differently. Productive dialogue between the two traditions later arose from their common recognition of the viewer as a subject with at least relative autonomy with regard to the interpretation of available media content. But the manner in which this viewer 'activity' was defined varied significantly between the Columbia School's positivist approach, on the one hand, and Birmingham's critical approach, on the other. Where the functionalist uses and gratifications tradition was geared toward individual and social needs addressed by choosing and using some specific program, the critical school proposed instead a sharp semantic turn, examining how meaning is produced in the interaction between viewers and texts.

Audience studies were thus oriented towards rectifying prior research's failure to attend to cultural codes, taking the interaction between media content and users' reading as the determining moment, but avoiding the trap of decontextualized analysis of immanent textual readings. The notion of gratifications was replaced by that of reading, facilitating the move from a psychological needs model of uses, to a culturally- and

sociologically-motivated framework built around a semiotic, conversational, and ethnographic model of the user.

Research has already delimited the blind spots of those methodologies which ask spectators to describe their reactions to program content. Given the researcher's role in artificially producing discussion groups, for example, the authenticity of interpretations provided by interviewees in such circumstances is doubtful. Rather, it is important to approach the 'natural milieu' of informants in order to grasp and describe as accurately as possible the micro-interactions which constitute informants' media use. In response, an approach arose around observing the viewing subject in her or his 'natural milieu', such as the context of daily family life. This approach privileges, not the semantic interaction between television viewer and media text --- though this tendency is not completely abandoned --- but rather a capture of media uses in the everyday context of an individual, family, community, and so forth. It is an approach concerned less with the reception of specific content from specific programs, and more with the styles of relationship and stances that viewers develop in response to television flow streamed into the household, sometimes constantly. Here researchers mobilize investigative techniques associated more closely with the ethnographic tradition (participant observation, in-depth informant interviews, life stories, etc.) in order to gather together as many significant elements as possible into a finely-grained description of the daily practices of media reception in the context of viewers' lived experiences.

Researchers interested in the relationship between media uses and daily life have, in this context, privileged a participant-observer approach. Morley, for example, suggests that the ethnographic observation of publics is not limited to the collection of descriptive data. Rather, the critical observer must also attend to the interpretation of the results obtained since, as Ang explains, 'the empirical does not offer the answers, as positivism would have it. Answers are to be constructed in the form of interpretation' (1989: 106). Ethnographers of daily lives work against preconceived notions of television programming as interacting identically with each member of a family, and strive instead for a model which would admit of the different levels of attention and varied roles that each family member adopts in relationship to a given programming unit. Rogge (1989), for example, attempts to move beyond the direct-effects or uses and gratifications models by analyzing not only the particular functions which a TV program's uses can take on within a given household, but also the pragmatic consequences of this choice on communicative modes within the family environment. Rogge's research concerns thus proceed from the desire for an in-depth understanding of television use's anchoring in the daily life of families, to a more complex research strategy aiming to size up the phenomenon of reception in its multidimensionality.

Media Uses and Broadcast Policies

Thinking on democracy is increasingly concerned with the role of media. In particular, critical research on the link between media and democracy has proceeded from theories of public space first formulated by Habermas (1978; cf. Dahlgren, 1995; Price, 1995; Garnham, 2000). The link becomes more complex when we add the dimension of media uses, and of the various affiliations between individuals and media generally. Users are

constructed as viewers, consumers, and citizens, among others (Corner, 1991): what is meant by such different terms when used to describe the same speaking subjects? Morley provides an initial response, pointing to the media's work in articulating the public and private spheres, and in the social organization of space, time, and communal life (1992: 1). Media use is neither purely public nor private, but always a blend, in varying degrees. As such, media use structures and is structured by social and political institutions, and by the individuals who constitute them.

Drawing policy studies and audience studies closer together requires that we conceptualize the individual as the subject of both political and media apparatuses --- the communicative subject is at once user and citizen. The state's agencies intervene in the larger structures through which media uses are organized while, mediated through media forms, public perception structured through media use influences and orients state intervention. At the interface of policy and audience studies are thus plural approaches to a single problematic, conceived by the former as the relationship between media and public, and by the latter as the media-audience relationship. These approaches are shot through with considerations at once theoretical and practical.

In the context of a funded research program(1), we explored the relevance of field studies on Canadian citizens' media uses, habits, and perceptions, for conducting evaluation of Canadian broadcasting policy. In particular, we sought to examine how certain viewer-citizens judge television programming, on the one hand, and the mandate which Canadian broadcasting policy assigns to television, on the other.

Today, television plays a central role in constituting the public spaces in which take place key social and political debates on democratic life, on civic roles, on identity politics, and on social inclusion. States have historically regulated these public media spaces by invoking the principles of public interest, or of public service. The airwaves are recognized as a public utility good; because spectrum is finite, a government role in managing how that spectrum was allocated appeared normal. Today, on the other hand, the double context of media globalization and of new technologies' reworking of the audiovisual landscape --- digitization of signals, multiplication of modes of distribution, convergence between old and new media, integration of the Internet --- contributes to the fragility of national governments' traditional approaches (Atkinson and Raboy, 1997; Brants et al., 1998). Where the possibilities for communication and for transmission appear unlimited, the horizons opened up by technological transformations can be and, frequently, are framed within a neo-liberal ideology favourable to deregulation. Some governments seek to resist these market pressures, and look instead for new bases on which to determine the legitimacy (or lack thereof) for regulating broadcasting and telecommunications. For these governments, the rhetoric of public interest must be articulated with data mined from corpuses which go beyond those generated by cultural industries lobbies and logics, because these latter tend to define viewers exclusively through their roles as consumers, and therefore miss part of the story.

Instead, policymakers would do well to make better use of field studies oriented towards the expression of a social demand for public communication --- that is, a demand defined first of all by criteria linked to social and community life, not simply indices of industrial and commercial success. Our methodological model moves in this direction through a joint analysis of, on the one hand, the discourse of actors responsible for formulating policy and regulation and, on the other, statements made by media users

during semi-directed interviews and discussion groups. It is our hypothesis that users are in a position to evaluate their own media consumption viewed against a conception of public space as anchored to citizenship, and as necessary for democratic life. To illustrate this, we present here the analysis of some of the results of a Quebec study undertaken with citizens who had been involved at some point during their lives with social or political activism. We postulated that activist practices were likely to have foregrounded civic consciousness in those involved and, to test this, asked them first about how they used the media --- especially television --- and then to evaluate, on one hand, the content and form of the television programming available to them, and the usefulness of some key Canadian broadcast policies, on the other.

Interviewees' Media Practices and Expectations

Our discussants(2) (perhaps because their professional and personal lives are relatively hectic, perhaps also because they were particularly critical of available television programming) turned out to be relatively light television consumers compared with the viewing habits of the majority. That notwithstanding, our discussants' media consumption routines were quite diverse. Some preferred television's entertainment function, while others viewed the medium as a source of information:

Former political advisor (female), 39 years old: As for me, I don't watch much television ... we devote very little time to watching television, and it's above all got nothing to do with entertainment for me, not at all. Purely public affairs, and sound bites at that, like TV news ...

Student (male), 22 years old: I watch a lot of public affairs shows, I watch the news, sometimes a bit of entertainment, but that's strictly films, and maybe some series from time to time, but that's not my main interest.

The individuals' descriptions of their media practices sometimes revealed surprising elements. These practices tended to fall into the category of private life (single life, life in a couple, family life), usually hidden from external view. Some of our informers painted an intimate and even touching portrait of their media use habits:

Former political activist (female), 40 years old: Sometimes I'll watch just about anyone talk about anything ... just about everything interests me, anyway. So I'll come across an ethnic show, let's say I hear Italian, it reminds me of my classes way back when, I like it, I watch it and ... there's something and it's good. There are téléromans(3) --- I might be the only one here who watches téléromans --- but ... they're a real pleasure. There are some [shows] that are just lovely and for me, it's not because they call it a téléroman that I'm not going to watch it. On the contrary, every season I look for a good one, and sometimes I find it. There are series, and I try them ... because my expectations are entertainment ... I like baseball, and I enjoy

watching it on TV; I'm glad it's on the sports channel. So I'm interested in a real range of entertainment, and that makes me happy.

It is well-established that opinion polls in North America and in Europe point to an ever-growing enthusiasm for television each year. Television has not only become most citizens' principal news source, but is furthermore perceived as a more credible information source than the written press (Gitlin, 2001). When our discussants compared television to the written press (or even to radio), their opinions diverged from these perennial opinion poll results. Whereas they generally attached greater credibility to the written press (and sometimes to radio), they displayed a degree of suspicion as to television's credibility as a news source. In all cases, however, their expectations of television were markedly weak:

Student (male), 22 years old: I always have the impression that there's some sort of bias in the information they provide, so ... add that to my low level of expectations, and that's one more misgiving about television. Instead I go to the print media, to the written press, and to magazines, too.

Political party activist (female), 25 years old: My expectations of radio are enormous, and I'm enormously disappointed ... because I spend hours every day in my car and I'm enormously disappointed because there's only CBC(4) [which is acceptable to me].

Great Expectations for Public Television

Some of our discussants had expectations specific to public television --- they expected higher quality where public broadcasting was involved:

Engineer involved with Amnesty International (male), 40 years old: For me it's the historic and cultural stuff. Ever since I've been watching television, I've always been more interested in the CBC, so I've felt as though the CBC had some kind of responsibility to continue interesting me. That's why I react more when I see something dull on the CBC.

Political party activist (female), 25 years old: I don't expect the State television or State radio station to educate me.... I expect news programs which I find interesting and in good taste, and I don't want them to tell me how to behave all the time, either. That's a bit what I was fed up with at Radio-Québec(5) for a while.

Former political activist (female), 40 years old: My first reaction is to put the CBC into a special category, perhaps because I, at least, remember that it's a public-interest [network]. That may be the only thing I do remember when I watch TV, but I do think that I remember it the whole time, so it's as if it got me angrier when the CBC is rotten than when Télé-Métropole(6) is rotten....

Maybe I'm more resigned when it comes to the others.... I don't know if, in ten years, I'm going to remember which one is public when I watch them. I don't know if, in ten years, we'll still be able to say we expect something from the State ... but for now, there's still a link there.

Former political activist (female), 40 years old: I think that the CBC may be that common ground we were talking about before, I mean that what happens there affects all of us; we at least have some place we can all refer to ...

Social worker (female), 40 years old: The mandate, in my opinion, of public television might be that it's the one that's supposed to contribute to [democratic life] because it's less driven by economic imperatives, even if we have to pay for it in some way. So it's the one which at least has to be able to respond to [democracy's imperatives] and to open up and say, 'Are we, as a society, ready to pay the price for having a television station that looks like that?'

Public and Private Television Resemble One Another More and More

Several discussants observed an increasing level of similarity between programming on public and on private television, with both supplying programs that aim to be 'popular' -- that is, which earn high audience ratings --- and veering away from concerns over program quality:

Student (male), 22 years old: In order to reach as many people as possible, I sometimes feel as though the CBC was lowering its level to that of the other networks, so that it could be as popular as they are. We can see that in some of the CBC's télémans, and also on the news.

Engineer involved with Amnesty International (male), 40 years old: In terms of news and public affairs, for the last two or three years I haven't seen much difference, or at least a lot less. I'd say it's degraded; I'm talking about the CBC, which ... tried to put itself at the same level as the others.... It's moved to the lowest common denominator over the last two, three years.

Activist theologian (male), 70 years old: There's almost no difference between the CBC and the private [channels], because the CBC has deteriorated tremendously... I'd say that there was nonetheless, in the past, a thought-out vision of Canada. They really wanted to influence public opinion, a bit, towards a certain vision of Canada, partly to distinguish Canada from the United States, and so on.... Today, that's a lot less [obvious].

Individualist Use Habits and Demands of Media

Surprisingly to the authors, the interviewees --- all of whom had been involved in social causes at some point during their lives, suggesting at least a certain social conscience --- showed little interest in changing the way the Canadian broadcasting system works or the directions that it has taken. Instead, they tended to treat this issue in an *individualist* manner: if unsatisfied with a program aired on a given channel, they were far more likely to simply change channels, or even change media, in order to look for other sources to better satisfy their information or entertainment needs. They did not display any desire or intention at the level of *collective* demands.

Political party activist (female), 25 years old: Rather than make demands of the very poor information they've got on Télé-Métropole (for example), I change channels ... and, if there's nothing on TV, I'll go for something else. There are lot of newspapers, so there are always [alternatives]. I'd be lying if I said there was nothing good ... on television, ... there's always something good, it's about knowing how to read the TV schedule. (...) As for us [the discussants present this evening], we're in a position not to be too demanding of the media because we're lucky enough to be able to buy six newspapers in a day to read the sports in one, politics in another, some columnist in another, and then another columnist in another one.... I'd say most of us wouldn't have a problem with shopping for six newspapers a day, the way things are.... We're going to have to have demanding people if we want to get the most of a single medium because, like I said, we're in a democracy. If I'm not satisfied, I'll go to the university, we've got all of them at the library. And if I've got the means, I'll subscribe to three newspapers ... I did it once, for a year, but no ordinary person can read six newspapers a day! We need demanding people. I'm not one of them, but socially speaking, it would be nice.

Former political advisor (female), 39 years old: Diversity means that, if you're not satisfied at any given moment, you can always go somewhere else. You find the channel which best fits you out of everything that's available in terms of the different kinds of media, and the different sources, too. I'll tend to react that way instead of thinking about changing the world.

The individual acceptance of the *status quo* in broadcasting is, on the surface, surprising. At the same time, however, it is consistent with the expectations that the discussants had exhibited with regard to the media system at large: expectations were low, and so demands were neither stringent nor exacting. Our interviewees further noted a fairly large degree of diversity in programming supply which, they felt, would be able to meet nearly anyone's needs relatively well. This observation contradicted other, rather negative judgments that the interviewees had made of the 'very poor' quality of the programming. What is more, when respondents did assert their identities as citizens who demand change, it was tempered by a clear sense of near-powerlessness with regard to the ability to concretely change program contents. Here, too, the ultimate resolution may be to look for responses to information and entertainment needs outside the media by breaking with media use habits --- that is, by interrupting the link of familiarity with media that over

time have become an almost obligatory point of passage for meeting any information and communication needs that one might experience.

Cultural organizer (female), 60 years old: That's me. I'm a protester.... I ask myself, 'But why is it only me, or maybe twenty other people who know all of this, when there's a whole audience out there that's hungry for this sort of thing [and has no access to it]?' ... That's why I'm demanding. It's time we stopped showing ourselves lousy television, lousy media.

Former political activist (female), 40 years old: If I knew how to be more demanding of CBC without necessarily having to fax them [all the time]... When there is really something that shocks me, I send them a fax.

Former political advisor (female), 39 years old: [T]he media will become omnipresent. We're going to have more and more expectations, which probably won't be met, but nonetheless... In my opinion ... we're going to take refuge in our own homes, and take a very passive role ... to watching television.... I think we're headed towards [the media mediating our love relationships]. I don't like that, not at all. I think that, as individuals, we've got to be much more active and build interpersonal relationships, and the places where people interact aren't built around the TV show they watched the night before.... If the way we interact with others is to talk about the TV show we watched last night, well, that really puts me off. We're headed towards that more and more, but I think we can say no to it, too.

Viewers Evaluate the Canadian Broadcasting Law

In effect since 1991, the Canadian Broadcasting Act provides a legal underpinning to television in Canada through its provision (article 3.1.d.iii) that:

[T]he Canadian broadcasting system should ... through its programming and the employment opportunities arising out of its operations, serve the needs and interests, and reflect the circumstances and aspirations, of Canadian men, women and children, including equal rights, the linguistic duality and multicultural and multiracial nature of Canadian society and the special place of aboriginal peoples within that society.

The law's text appears to be structured according to a principle of fair representation in the Canadian media system of social groups and members of all social categories of citizens --- a principle of justice which had spread through North America over the preceding fifteen-odd years, and reached Europe as well. The principle is strongly associated with the problematic of so-called 'political correctness' born in the United States following the demands of certain social movements (African-Americans, women, gays, First Nations) for parity and even, in some cases, affirmative action with regard to access to education, to employment, and to various public services for disadvantaged

groups. Social analysts have, for some years, noted the risks of a certain slippage in the debate over these policies which, unchecked, might result in a diversion from the policies' goals (e.g. Fish, 1999; Morris, 1997). Discussants alluded to these diversions:

Former political activist (female), 40 years old: Don't you think it's a bit too politically correct, [this excerpt of the law]?

Engineer involved with Amnesty International (male), 40 years old: It's like they don't want to forget anyone.

Political party activist (female), 25 years old: I don't think we'd have ever seen that in the U.S. There, it's obvious from the word go that everyone comes from all kinds of places and so you're going to have representation of a bit of everyone.

Is this legal text only an expression of hope or, on the contrary, does it spell out a duty or mission? Discussants dwelled on the true extent of the law: did it not amount to the expression of pious hopes? Because the law is expressed in the conditional mood ('should'), it was felt that such a statement did not force policy-makers to specify a precise form of regulation. This portion of the law, participants in one of the group discussions agreed, is not a principled statement which assigned a mission to the broadcasting system, but rather a relatively vague definition which did not assign the broadcasters any real obligations.

Engineer involved with Amnesty International (male), 40 years old: What are wishes doing in a law? We can wish for anything in the law; they should have used the term 'must'.

Former political advisor (female), 39 years old: The term 'should' means that they're setting out a mission, here, for a broadcasting system at the Canadian level. So that's something [towards] which we can tend but where everyone knows we're not going to get there. In politics you arrange things so you don't paint yourself into a corner; you put this kind of statement in the law, and all they have to do when there's an accusation is to say, 'It's true that we should have tried a bit harder, we sinned, we're sorry, we'll see what we can do.' In the end, at the political level, it's [tactically] perfect!

One participant noted that there was no necessary correspondence between a broadcasting system which met the law's requirements, on one hand, and a broadcasting system which would meet her hopes and needs, on the other:

Former political activist (female), 40 years old: It's true that, with a great deal of creativity, we could certainly get to a [system which meets the 1991 Act's mandate], but would I be interested in that system? I can't say.

Some users criticized what, for them, was the too-narrow scope of the present law. Other informants felt that the law did not sufficiently constrain economic forces:

Political party activist (female), 25 years old: They could have talked about how television is financed. To what point, for example, does a financial backer have the right to interfere [with programming]? They could have talked about that [in the Act] but they don't at all address the market side, it's purely ethnic...

Former political activist (female), 40 years old: Right now it's not the creators who decide.... It's the market players, it's the businesses.

Debating the Law's Pertinence

Some discussants questioned the very principle behind having a law control the Canadian broadcasting system. In one of the discussion groups, on the other hand, a debate broke out highlighting some of the positive results of a law dealing with these issues:

Engineer involved with Amnesty International (male), 40 years old: But I don't want any of that, it's simple. [The discussant gestures as though casting away his copy of the legal excerpt.] ... I don't want any document.

Former political activist (female), 40 years old: Something tells me that it's worth thinking about that a bit more. I'm not so sure I'd want to throw it in the garbage. Take a look, for example, at the ethnic channel. There must be a couple of subsidies which keep it running, a bit like the community TV station.... I'm pretty much in favour of [these channels' existence]. Maybe I'd change their programming; maybe I'd want to change things around (at these channels). But the idea that they exist in the first place, I like that. So I don't agree with throwing [the law] out. [Certainly,] it shouldn't be a nitpicking type of regulation that operates through juxtapositions, a layer here to please one person, another layer to please someone else, and so on until it becomes a total patchwork, a kind of quilt. The pattern starts to spin out of control. It could be simplified but I think that if the State doesn't do it, who's going to give [the media system] its soul?

Political party activist (female), 25 years old: There's [something] I'd like to say for the record I'd go with very, very broad values.... There would be consensus [around the idea that the law guarantee universal access to information] because they wouldn't be talking about an identity. Identity is very, very hard to crystallize. A minority is hard to [define], you know, the minority of the majority of the minority. We could never write all [of the minorities into the law], and I wouldn't even dare to get into it...

One aspect of the Act which jumped out at these Québécois discussants was its Canadian character. The text is marked by the Canadian political value of a national unity which encompasses cultural and linguistic diversity. As such, some felt that the legal text more reflected the desire to accomplish Canadian unity's overarching political objectives than any concern for universal access to the media:

Former political activist (female), 40 years old: Those are Canadian values. It's Canadian from the first word to the last, if you will, and I'm not saying that in a pejorative way, but what are the values it's trying to promote? ... Linguistic duality ... 'duality' means that you've got the one and then the other, and in all circumstances you've got one... Fine. After that, 'multicultural and multiracial character': Canadian.... I'm not sure I'd want a television which talks to me about linguistic duality or which reflects [it]... I'm not at all sure ... that it should respond to the circumstances and aspirations of any given Canadian. I'm sorry, but there are certain values that have to come before all that

Political party activist (female), 25 years old: I find this [legal extract] very political, because a law which deals with broadcasting needn't at all talk about linguistic duality or multiculturalism. It could just be about violence, or educational content, it could be something totally different while here, they've decided to make it about Canada.... [Thus] the first value isn't accessibility ... it's to be Canadian, it's a [Canadian] system [which] defines what is a Canadian, but in starting out they could have just said, 'In Canada the broadcasting system', but then, it wouldn't have been Canadian any more...

Looking for New Principles for Controlling the Media System

One discussant was concerned with resolving the contradiction between broadening media representation and guaranteeing the free expression of creators. Might these latter not, in fact, constitute the spokespersons of the citizenry?

Political party activist (female), 25 years old: You said earlier, 'Who should control television?' And Jeanne responded, 'the creators'. Spontaneously, I was going to say, 'the population', and I held back, because if we gave creators a bit more room, automatically, I think we'd have [broad representation], the Canadian reality, because an artist reflects the people.

Another discussant located a paradox in a broadcasting system searching to 'reflect the circumstances' of those using it. The debate which followed questioned the existing law and attempted to identify new principles on which to base an acceptable social check on the broadcasting system. Should 'common values' be identified with all citizens, shared values to which force of law might in some way be assigned? But how would this adhesion to 'common values' translate concretely into effective management of media

channels and programming? Without a law, on the other hand, wouldn't the media system become beholden to a strictly market-based logic? To the 1991 Act's affirmation of the necessity of reflecting citizens' circumstances and aspirations, suggested one discussant, might not a form of deontological code be substituted, to which all media professionals would be submitted, and whose application would guarantee the production and distribution of socially honest, fair, and non-discriminatory programming?

Political party activist (female), 25 years old: Like I said, there's a paradox there... 'Reflect the circumstances', well ... a show like 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous' doesn't reflect circumstances, but it sure reflects aspirations! Where poor people hope to become rich, are we supposed to have shows about the rich, in order to respond to people's aspirations, or is it shows about the poor people, because those are their circumstances? I mean, it could mean anything at all... There's another paradox: 'needs and interests'. They'd need to be defined, these 'interests' of the population, you know? Do we do lousy shows because the population wants them, or are the shows lousy because the population laps them up?

Former political activist (female), 40 years old: Aren't you afraid that we find ourselves in a strictly market-based logic [if we eliminated the Act without replacing it]? ... I like [televised sports] but, still, there are limits, and I don't want us to end up with three sports channels because it's profitable and can be financed, and then that I don't have the ethnic channel any more.

Numerous ideas were expressed towards improving the Act: that the Act require the establishment of a code of ethical behaviour; that the principles and values it expresses focus on quality of life; that the Act also mention broadcasters' social responsibility. Moreover, some respondents declared an interest in seeing democracy come through more in the media. In closing, participants discussed whether the legal requirements were met by the media system actually in place.

Political party activist (female), 25 years old: So what should the system do if not respond to people's interests and reflect their circumstances? What would be the ideal system? I don't know ... sort of a code of ethics for employees, [because] if everyone does their work well and conscientiously, it seems to me that at the end of the day the product just can't be that unfair, or discriminatory.

Community worker (female), 43 years old: The text would have to fix objectives that dealt with quality of life, that aimed to improve living conditions, that tried to reestablish a balance [with regard to] social and human [values] ... [If] my interests are pornography, and my needs involve being excited, well that would certainly [fall under the law]... [The system] could meet my needs and interests ... but is it meeting the needs and interests of improving quality of life and social balance? No.... It's too broad, and too open to interpretation.

Social worker (female), 40 years old: I'd want to see it talk more about social responsibility ... it's funny because we'd have thought it would be government telling us how we should behave but, right now, it's the markets telling us how we should behave. They've already imposed uniform needs, uniform interests and aspirations on us. In that sense, I think [that policy-makers] would have a lot more impact if they talked in terms of social responsibility: we could define broadcasters' social responsibility in terms of the public; there we'd certainly need signposts.

Community worker (male), 28 years old: Canada pretends to be a democratic society. For me, democracy isn't just the choice between the blue party and then, five years later, the red party... It's the broad participation of citizens in different organizations and from one ocean to the other, in lots of cities, in lots of environments, ... If we look around across Canada, there are groups which bring together thousands of people, and I think that that kind of democracy should show up more often in the media. We should make more room for that instead of always focusing on liberal democracy, which takes all the room.... I think there'd be room for people's aspirations, to hear from the people and ... the organizations that people have created in order to have a voice, in order to have power. To my mind, the broadcasting system should be the expression of real participative democracy.

Activist theologian (male), 70 years old: First, I didn't have any idea that [this] law existed... If someone had told me, 'Listen, here's the Canadian law', I would have said, 'I don't believe you one bit' ... it's so different from what's actually visible in the media these days.... As neither a lawyer nor a specialist, I find it interesting, and I'd say that the media in general don't seem to be making much of an effort to stick to this, [especially] reflecting the circumstances and aspirations of Canadian men, women and children: that's equality at the level of rights. Not bad.

Conclusion

This work has allowed us to identify certain political, even epistemological, tensions working across the field of communications and, more precisely, the study of television. This harkens back to a question which has troubled researchers since the day when Lazarsfeld and Adorno finally moved in separate directions (Peters, 1999): even as it contributes to an understanding and explanation of those phenomena being examined, can research also provoke and make possible critical intervention in the cultural field? To try and shift the direction of communication policy is a fundamentally reformist enterprise, and yet this mode of action may follow a critical perspective, rather than an administrative one, to extend Lazarsfeld's well-known notional distinction (Lazarsfeld, 1941).

This research has illustrated the extent to which cultural practices, such as television use, are located in a landscape marked with ambiguity --- where, for example, the user's desires and expectations are jumbled with his or her own cultural constitution, marked by a series of social and identity reference points whose internal consistency is anything but smooth. In an earlier study (Proulx, 1998), it was noted that the constant return to the category of 'user' could very well conceal other dimensions which participated, too, in the construction of individual social and cultural identities. These include, for example, one's belonging to a family as well as to various social networks in the workplace, the sphere of leisure, a socio-professional category, an ethno-cultural community, and so forth. Questioning our informants as to their daily practices, our approach attempted to capture the effective social practices of the individual as parent, worker, citizen, and activist.

We consider the evolution of a medium such as television to be a matter of citizenship (van Steenberg, 1994). In the Canadian case, as we have seen, policy-makers have written into the law that television *must* serve certain social and cultural ends, and attribute to it a relatively vague but certainly *normative* mission. Those whom we interviewed, however --- and remember that these were representatives of society's more active sociopolitical *milieux* --- had more ambivalent relationships with this medium: they appreciate its existence, but do not like it. Paradoxically, the expectations of these enlightened citizens did not seem to meet the level of those spelled out in the legal text.

That said, at a more fundamental level, our discussants expressed particular needs and interests which even an attentive State would have a hard time incorporating into policy. A State truly determined to compel television markets to play the role assigned to them would have to intervene more pointedly than through declarations of principle alone. As the users themselves asserted, such declarations too often boil down to pious wishes that, formulated in bureaucratic language, clash with their own perceptions of the supply of programming and their experience as television viewers.

Our study has led to the observation that television use is anchored deeply in the meanderings of individual personality. At the same time, television experience may also be understood largely through the individual's social positioning, and by the level of cultural capital to which that viewer has access. Uses are polymorphous, combining individual tastes and temperaments, as well as various characteristics of family situation, political interests, and the resources and constraints afforded by the economic environment. In situating these media uses in the context of the individual's broader set of social practices, we have sought to compensate for the epistemological weakness of audience ratings exercises whose description of viewer behaviour is reduced to an accounting of binary acts (open, close the television set) which are more readily computable but cannot account for the richness of the polymorphous experience woven around television viewing (Proulx, 1998; Hartley, 1999).

By considering television use as part of a set of socializing activities, this exploratory work seeks to contribute to an understanding of what we have called social demand in communication policy. We believe that such an approach can help constitute a new basis on which to test and innovate on communication policy in the context of a State which, as communication policy authority, is besieged on one side by the sirens of deregulation and, on the other, left behind by individualist users whose faith in politics may be in a relatively advanced stage of erosion.

At the theoretical level, this effort is one in a series of ventures to reduce the gap between the political economy and cultural studies approaches in the field of communications. Important debates on the topic have mobilized numerous researchers since the mid-1990s (e.g. Gandy, 1995). But there are few examples of empirical investigations attempting to illuminate this theoretical debate. That, modestly, has been our objective.

Notes

(1) This program was initially funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC, 1995-1998) and then by the Quebec government's Fonds pour la formation des chercheurs et l'aide à la recherche (FCAR, 1998-2001).

(2) In short, these were: a retired feminist organizer; a former political aide; an activist Catholic theologian; an information officer for a trade-union federation; a social worker in an inner-city community center; a bio-medical engineer and supporter of Amnesty International; the head of a lobby group on race relations; an opposition city councilor; the director of communications for a large metropolitan hospital; a community organizer working with tenants' groups; a student member of a government committee on constitutional reform; a Mohawk elder; an active member of several ethno-cultural organizations; an organizer with a federation of regional community groups; a student active in local economic development.

(3) *Téléromans* are a French-language genre of popular drama series made in Québec.

(4) The national public broadcaster: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation / Société Radio-Canada.

(5) The Quebec public educational broadcaster (now known as Télé-Québec).

(6) Quebec's most popular private television network.

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