

Transnational Radio and Public Broadcasting in Canada in the Early 1930s

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Modern Canadians have always been exposed to the transnational flow of American mass media. Bordering the United States, but with one-tenth the population and economy, and sharing in large part the same language and social characteristics, Canada was a prime market for overflow American cultural products from the nineteenth century on. With a slight caveat regarding newspapers, all early mass media (popular fiction, mass market magazines, and especially movies) not only easily crossed the border but dominated the Canadian market. Radio was no exception. From the era of the amateurs through the beginnings of broadcasting in the 1920s, many (probably most) Canadians could tune in to American radio, and from all accounts did so with great enjoyment.

According to the theories of cultural imperialism popular in the 1960s and 1970s, in Canada as much as elsewhere, this penetration by the cultural products of another country was fundamentally damaging to the development of a national identity among Canadians, who were assumed to be passive and unresisting consumers of the flood of foreign ideas and ideology. In the specific case of early Canadian radio, the narrative was framed by the proponents of the creation of a Canadian public broadcaster. As Graham Spry famously put it, the choice was “The State or the United States.” In this scenario, the “bad guys” were the Canadian private broadcasters who aped American practices and borrowed American content. Significantly, two of the major private stations in each of Canada’s two largest cities, for sound business reasons of attracting audiences and advertisers, became affiliates of American networks in the late 1920s, and the trend toward full integration into American broadcasting seemed inexorable.

In recent decades theorists have modified and complicated the rather stark polarization of the cultural imperialist model. Terms such as “asymmetric interdependence,” “hybridity,” “globalization” and “cultural transnationalism” are utilized to theorize cultural relationships that are more complex, contextualized, and fluid than those posited by the cultural imperialism school. Demands have grown for scholarship that is more rooted and empirical, and which combines awareness of the structural economic power of the dominant cultural producers (especially the United States) with anti-essentialist concepts of indigenous cultures and interest in audience reception theory. While still concerned with fundamental matters of identity, the nation-state and communications, they offer a more sophisticated if not yet fully realized analysis of the ever-increasing transnational flow of communication media.

This paper will discuss some of the issues of transnational media flow and the response of the recipient country by using the case of Canadian radio in the early 1930s. More specifically, it will examine how the public broadcasting body that Graham Spry lobbied for, the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC), negotiated the fact that American radio, and Canadian commercial radio modelled on American practices, already dominated the Canadian marketplace and listeners’ expectations when it was created in 1932. I will use two principal types of sources. First, CRBC officials, especially Chairman Hector Charlesworth, wrote and spoke from time to time about what they believed to be the contribution of the CRBC’s national network to Canadian listeners and to the nation. Two claims stand out: the CRBC’s network enabled

Canadians to speak to one another, and it enabled the presentation of special programs of national and imperial significance. Both assertions, it may be noted, concerned fostering internal unity, not addressing external threats. While a few of the scripts for these special programs have survived, almost nothing of the regularly scheduled fare has done so. Therefore my second source is a database I have constructed of a sample of CRBC program schedules from 1933 to 1936, when the Commission was disbanded and replaced by the CBC. It provides a more macro-level source through which one can study what genres of programs were most utilized, where they originated, and how the schedules changed over time. For comparative purposes a similar database of the evening schedules of CBS and NBC in the same period is analyzed. Preliminary findings indicate that when it could the CRBC aired programs very similar to those on the U.S. networks, but sometimes with a time lag. Where they differed most starkly was in the origination of programs, which was much more diverse for the CRBC than was the case in the U.S. at the time.

Three general conclusions are reached. First, the CRBC's practices must be understood in the context of a long history of cross-border media flow, the result of basic economic and social structures that had shaped Canadian popular culture for many decades. Secondly, in the competitive continental context, the CRBC had little choice but to offer its audiences programming genres and routinized schedules imitative of those on the American networks. Thirdly, the CRBC's national network did provide two programming elements that distinguished it from the U.S. networks. The first was a judicious sprinkling of special events programs that celebrated the nation and, especially, the link to the empire/commonwealth. Secondly, ninety per cent of the programs originated in Canada, and from many different centres. Although such programs often borrowed American genres, they provided Canadian artists with employment, and they sometimes directly reflected local and regional cultural specificities. As Paul Rutherford put it a number of years ago (*The Making of the Canadian Media*, 1978, p. 102), American media may have been foreign in Canada, but they were not alien. They were deeply interwoven with indigenous communications in what he called a "hybrid" system. While the concept of "hybridity" has subsequently been developed and theorized in a very different context, its applicability to the Canadian case deserves further exploration. Such studies, however, must place the cultural analysis within the framework of the fundamental asymmetry of the political, social, economic and institutional forces moulding media flow in North America.

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