Public-Service Broadcasting as a Modern Project: A Case Study of Early Public-Affairs Television in Canada

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Abstract: This study of public-affairs programs suggests that Canadian television hardly functioned as a modern disciplinary apparatus in its initial years. In the early 1950s, Canadian broadcasters sought to stake out and strategize a “middle ground” between U.K. (information) and U.S. (entertainment) TV, featuring public-affairs programs that Canadians would actually choose to watch in a more or less competitive North American broadcast market. However, newsmagazines and traditional long-form documentaries consistently violated the early pedagogical protocols of Canadian television and thus call into question conventional notions of public-service broadcasting. These shows and the controversies they generated should make us rethink Eurocentric theories about public-service broadcasting as a quintessential disciplinary machine.

Introduction
In the early 1950s, Canadian broadcasters developed a set of strategies to engage the public in a way British and American television had not. Canadian television would stake out what one broadcaster at the time called a “middle ground” between U.K. (information) and U.S. (entertainment) TV, featuring public-affairs...
programs that Canadians would actually choose to watch in a more or less competitive North American broadcast market (Moore, 1952). It is these middle-ground information-entertainment public-affairs programs that I want to examine in this paper, along with the perpetual struggles over representation that surrounded them in the 1950s. It is my contention that these shows and the controversies they generated should make us rethink conventional theories concerning public-service broadcasting as a quintessential disciplinary machine dedicated to the containment of meaning and pleasure within orderly boundaries. In this paper, I thus question the idea of a “modern era,” at least as it applies to the world of Canadian public-affairs broadcasting.

My argument rests in large part on a distinction between public-service theory and practice. I offer a study in counterpoint, beginning with a detailed look at public-affairs television as it was conceived by Canadian policymakers and educators in the early 1950s, followed by a review of production and critical discourses surrounding the programs in the early years of Canadian television. In my conclusion, I consider what this study might tell us about the nature of periodization in contemporary television research.

Public-affairs television in theory: The modern project
Canadian policymakers tended to view television as a pedagogic service with public-affairs programming as its cornerstone. Canada’s Massey Commission, for instance—which presided over the introduction of Canadian television service in 1952—argued that television should inform Canadians about various aspects of their lives while helping to instill in them a certain “discriminatory sense.” Specifically, the Massey Commissioners hoped information programming would encourage Canadians to concern themselves with real as opposed to synthetic situations, and pay attention to the particularities of place as opposed to the homogeneous world of fantasy. Information television would thus serve as a countervailing force against the twin dangers of propaganda and mass culture, serving as a sort of grounded citizenship-training course in the early Cold War era. As the genre most explicitly concerned with the nitty-gritty of Canadian public life, public-affairs broadcasting was regarded as a cornerstone of liberal-humanist culture (Canada, Report of the Royal Commission on national development in the arts, letters and sciences, 1951, pp. 37-38, 50-51).2

Policymakers and educators also had definite ideas about how public-affairs programs should be produced and watched. The Massey Report called for the maintenance of proper boundaries between information and entertainment programs and was particularly critical of broadcasters who lacked specialized knowledge and cultivated “certain base forms of popular appeal” (Report, p. 297). The emergence in radio of subjective modes of address and opportunities for audience involvement was also frowned upon. Overall, the Commission urged the “maintenance of good taste” in public-affairs television (p. 304).

In a similar spirit, policymakers and educators recommended the regulation of images and stories in public-affairs programming. Images in public-affairs television, according to the Massey Report, should be employed with restraint and
purpose: programs should “teach not by pictorial or dramatic effect but by coherent and logical presentation of fact” (p. 311). Narrative structures should adhere to a rigorous cumulative expository structure, along the lines of the National Film Board’s documentary films. Canada’s information-television aesthetic should thus be governed by well-established (mostly literary and cinematic) principles of representation in public-service broadcasting.

Finally, the Commission and many of its academic interveners recommended close supervision of the way the programs were watched. Policymakers and educators argued that viewing information-television programs at home should ideally be rather like watching documentaries at the cinema or local community centre, the audiovisual information venues of the previous decade. Home viewers were to be focused, engaged, and, as much as possible, collectively involved with the new public-affairs TV shows. They should give programs their undivided attention and then discuss them with their families or neighbours (Johnson, 1952).

Educators hoped children might watch information programs after school and be tested on them the next day (CBC Times, 1954a), though even here, according to the CBC’s assistant director of children’s TV broadcasts, the new younger public-affairs audience should be discouraged from “long periods [of viewing] . . . they should not lie on the floor . . . [and] there will be a need for constant vigilance by the men and women with taste and judgment” (Rainsberry, 1957). For both children and adults, programs should be scheduled at precise but varying times, this presumably to discourage casual viewing habits associated with American audiences. Canadian viewers, it was hoped, would come to appreciate the rigour of the new schedule, just as the idealized comprehensive listeners of radio shows such as the CBC’s Wednesday Night had learned to appreciate eclectic information-drama-music fare, effortlessly making the switch from genre to genre, often for hours on end—and much better for it, according to critic Mavis Gallant (1949).

By these accounts, Canadian television would have to dedicate itself to the production of difficult programs for disciplined audiences. In the post-war era, policymakers and educators tended to regard television as a functional apparatus with which representations of Canada could be systematically produced and consensually understood within more or less orderly networks of signification. From this vantage point, Canadian television would be a modern project: one whose meanings and pleasures would be regulated in accordance with well-established hierarchies of knowledge and representation, for the good of the Canadian public.

Public-affairs television in practice: “Middle ground” programming at the CBC
But what about Canadian television in practice? Did Canadian television, in the defining program genre of its public-service age, even loosely adhere to the pedagogic protocols set forth in early policy documents? There are reasons to be skeptical. Modes of production, textual organization, distribution, and reception differed in fundamental respects from the plans laid out in the Massey Report. As
we shall see, public-affairs television is a fairly weak model of paternalist public broadcasting and modern representation.

**The new public-affairs audience**

First, and perhaps most basically, Canadian public-service television seemed fundamentally incapable of regulating its audience. Research at the CBC in the late 1940s and early 1950s, for instance, suggested that dispersed home viewers would be hard to organize into disciplined community circles. According to one 1953 report, broadcasters would have to address themselves to “one person at a time” and “learn to compete with bridge, poker and gossip and many other factors not encountered in stage or screen” (Jackson, 1953). Television’s modes of reception were seen to be largely uncontrollable compared with previous modes of mass communication.

CBC documents of the time further indicate a widespread sense that getting Canadians to watch Canadian television at all, let alone in the “correct” ways mandated by educators and policymakers, would be a challenge in the early days of Canadian television. Canadian TV would, after all, not only need to attract new viewers but win over many more from its American competition, especially in major metropolitan markets such as Montreal and Toronto, which were already receiving U.S. television over the border. As *Food for Thought*’s Alan Sangster lamented just three months after the service went on the air: “What [Canadian audiences] now demand and all they will accept from TV is straightforward entertainment. As a result of years of exposure to American commercial TV, their viewing habits may already be set” (Sangster, 1953b). Even children would have to be won over to the public-affairs program because, as the producers of *Junior Magazine* noted in 1953, “Whereas the young viewer may have to pay attention to lessons in school, in the living room he [sic] has only to change channels” (*CBC Times*, 1953b).

In short, CBC research indicated that Canadian television viewers were hardly the pedagogically available citizens forecast in policy documents and educational briefs. Public-affairs producers had ceased to regard viewers as an ideal public-service audience—as comprehensive viewers, for instance, ready and able to take up serious or popular positions in turn as required by the text; or as a segmented body, the lower orders of which might eventually be led on to better things. Public-affairs viewers instead quickly came to be seen as a sort of brute common denominator, the needs and desires of which should be more or less accepted—that is, accommodated, or at least addressed by, the programs themselves. All in all, new spaces of watching were seen to render Canadian television’s pleasures quite unamenable to pedagogic control.

**The new public-affairs text**

Second, and related, Canadian public-affairs programs seemed incapable of maintaining established public-service hierarchies of knowledge and representation in the texts themselves. True, documentary programs, particularly those supplied by the National Film Board, could be doggedly instructional and “wordy,” as one producer himself put it in an internal memo (Hallman, 1955, p. 2). But, overall, pro-
grams produced by the Corporation were determinedly televisual and quite at odds with the textual models laid out in pedagogical charters.

The most important model for documentary programming, and the one most at odds with educational-disciplinary theory, was the television magazine. The documentary form as such took shape in the earliest production workshops of Canadian television, most notably in April 1952, when American producer Gilbert Seldes was invited to Toronto to give a 10-day course on factual programs based on his experiences in American commercial television. Documentaries, Seldes had noted in his book *Writing for Television*, were cheaper than fiction and variety shows with their “orchestras, ballets and multiple sets,” and might even become profitable if their material was “tractable enough to be worked into popular television” (1952, p. 183). Seldes went on to suggest a number of concrete steps by which the new Canadian genre could become as popular as an “entertainment rag.” First and foremost, programs should be organized as magazines, made up of distinct but complementary segments that would be constantly “billboarded” during the show. Public-affairs stories could borrow some tricks from variety programs and quiz shows. “Under the ‘Big D for Documentary,’” noted Seldes, “are other d’s—for demonstration, dramatization and discussion” (p. 190). A lighter touch for lineups was also advised. “You will discover after a few months in the business,” Seldes warned his students, “that documentary seems to deal exclusively with unpleasant subjects such as Communism, crimes, syphilis and the like” (p. 192). Genuinely “middle ground” programming should instead draw upon all the stories and storytelling tools at producers’ disposal.

While the CBC’s Supervisor of Public Affairs Eugene Hallman noted that documentaries would always be more than a “commercial enterprise” on Canadian television, he agreed with Seldes that the television magazine could adequately meet “cultural objectives” of public-service broadcasters. Magazines in fact served a number of purposes for the Corporation. Hallman pointed out that the shows would allow the Corporation to deal with a large number of topics in a short amount of time, “preventing capture of the airwaves by any one special interest.” Their general-interest format promised to attract a “wide range of viewers,” boosting the popular legitimacy of the Corporation as it struggled to make a case for public broadcasting. And if nothing else, magazines were a “tele-

vision original” that would prevent the “documentary from fall[ing] into [the NFB’s] hands by default” (1955, p. 2).

There were thus sound (and sometimes selfish) institutional reasons for adopting the magazine show as the cornerstone of public-affairs television in Canada. But whatever their public-service origins and aims, the programs did have the effect of radically undermining established traditions of knowledge and representation at the CBC, and it is these cultural effects to which I now turn. First, distinctions between pulp and the pedagogy were almost impossible to maintain in magazine programming, given the way the shows were produced and scheduled. In 1953, for instance, the CBC’s first English newsmagazine, *Tabloid*, received stories from six different information and entertainment departments,
concerning farm topics, sports, public affairs, and highbrow cultural matters (CBC Times, 1953b). _Tabloid_ was expressly designed to be eclectic and popular, and in its later stages was developed in consultation with the CBC’s new Audience Research Department—partly at the insistence of CBC affiliates, which complained existing network public-affairs programs lacked commercial potential. The program was then given a good deal of showbiz publicity in newspapers and trade magazines and inserted into the CBC’s prime-time schedule, between the nightly newscast and the nightly entertainment lineup. It’s clear that _Tabloid_ was produced, promoted, and scheduled in ways increasingly indistinct from entertainment television.

The (uncertain) mix of information and entertainment was even more evident in the lineups of the shows themselves. CBC _Newsmagazine_, for instance, covered “everything from bums to beauties, crime to politics” in its first year on the air. “You meet so many interesting people,” reported Rassky (1953). The current-affairs show _Close-Up_ featured stories on beatniks, unwed mothers, mixed marriages, communism, and homosexuality in its first two seasons. Other programs mixed styles to get the message across. _Scope_, for instance, used “drama, dance, documentary and even rock and roll” to explore social and cultural issues (CBC Times, 1954d).

Clearly the traditional precedence accorded to information over entertainment and traditional distinctions between fact and fiction were not always maintained in early program planning and production. Many critics accused the service of “rank sensationalism,” noting that “taste and good judgment” had fallen by the wayside in the quest for ratings and shock value (Lepkin, 1956b). As one bemused observer put it in 1956, the CBC seemed “determined to cover everything in every way” (Poulton, 1956), leaving established public-service hierarchies of knowledge and representation in question if not in ruins.

**The new public-affairs personality**

Public-affairs programs further upset the boundaries and hierarchies of public-service representation by allowing increasingly subjective modes of address and opportunities for audience involvement. To be sure, personalized journalism evolved more slowly than surely at the CBC. As late as 1939, for instance, public-affairs announcers in radio were recruited exclusively from “positions of authority” (including only “educated men possessed of clear Canadian voices with a masculine quality” [Seldes, 1952, p. 190]). Hosts were also limited to recording in the studio (partly by technological constraints, partly by union restrictions) and prohibited from identifying themselves by name. The same traditions carried on into television in its very earliest days, with _Newsmagazine_ starting out in 1952 as “little more than a TV counterpart of a newsreel or film . . . impersonal and briefly factual,” as one producer later put it (CBC Times, 1957). Public-affairs broadcasting thus seemed to effectively preclude all opportunities for subjective address and audience identification in its programs.

But producers also drew on a different public-affairs tradition, personified by the more subjective reports of Matthew Halton and his wartime radio colleagues.
In these reports, Halton and others spoke not just as institutional representatives, but as personal witnesses to the events they were covering, in a way mere news announcers could not. In the earliest days of television, public-affairs producers recognized the importance of a documentary subject of this sort giving something of a “personal stamp to the program [and] becoming a personality with whom the audience can identify” (Hallman, 1955, p. 3). Personalized journalism was hard to resist given the hectic production schedules and threadbare economies of the new information medium, which allowed for brief encounters between reporters and events but often not much more. But it was also endorsed by the increasingly market-conscious public-service culture at the time. The success of personality-driven shows in the United States was well known and often envied in Canada, and audiences north of the border were deemed to be “ready for adult companionship and interesting people with stimulating and provocative ideas and information” (Gillis, 1958). By the mid-1950s, then, television had effectively re-located the voice of public affairs in the person of the personality-host.

Personalized journalism was, certainly, more than just a market strategy at the CBC. Program authorities pointed out that on-air personalities served a pedagogical purpose by helping to guide viewers through the chaotic new world of television public affairs. Public-affairs personalities were seen to help shows make sense. Hosts and commentators, the CBC Times pointed out, gave the programs a “distinctiveness and a unity which the printed magazine achieves through a distinctive writing style” (1957). Some hosts were authoritative, Close-Up’s Frank Willis appearing to one journalist as the “great mover . . . who summons the people, who brings them before our eyes and who makes them important . . . all with a colossal assurance” (Brehl, 1957). Others were more personable, but they still worked to make a fantastic world of “scattered times and places” cohere in a meaningful way, as one 1954 critic put it with respect to Tabloid’s Dick Macdougal (Garner, 1954). In a sense, then, personalized journalism was a pedagogic device, required by the exigencies of television.

But hosts were also seen to allow for more affective and unpredictable types of audience involvement, clearly at odds with the civic detachment recommended in early policy reports. Even as they were promoted as instructors, program personalities were encouraged to speak directly to viewers to encourage affective rather than purely cognitive modes of identification. Tabloid featured wisecracking reporters and claimed its viewers took up the “cudgel for individual members of the cast . . . [sending] letters saying I like you but I don’t like the others” (Brehl, 1957). Junior Magazine was even more aggressive in its 1955 season, requiring its hosts to sing a verse of “Getting to Know You” at the beginning of each show (Lepkin, 1956b). In short, viewers were encouraged to regard reporters as something more than teachers and public affairs as something more than information in the early days of documentary television.

Affective involvement was also carefully cultivated by repositioning reporters as a visible presence in the studio and in the field. Producer Ross Maclean adopted a general policy of dispatching reporters on location to develop
in each reporter “that TV standby, the familiar friend” (*CBC Times*, 1955b). Reporter Percy Saltzman, one of the new breed, reminded one reviewer of a “small boy trying to get into every picture of the *Tabloid* show” (Garner, 1954). More and more, announcers and journalists emerged as the full-fledged personality-subjects of public-affairs discourse, the “happy chums, sincere helpers, and affable fellows of television,” as Gilbert Seldes had put it (1952, p. 190). Producers thus worked to make stories not just meaningful, but dramatic, with protagonists attached.

Hosts were similarly re-positioned as on-air personalities in a way early policymakers never dreamed of. Cellomatic projectors—essentially rear screens using transparent overlays—allowed them to apparently interact with a variety of maps and graphs, thereby connecting with the outside world in new ways. Teleprompters further allowed for more contact with viewers at home by eliminating the constant looking up from script to camera (*CBC Times*, 1958). Hosts thus took on the role of mediators between stories in the field and viewers at home, emerging, at least in theory, as the locus for new forms of subjective trust (see Morse, 1986).

Finally, producers worked to encourage audience identification by producing more intimate and involving forms of documentary imagery. Overall, it was felt, the pictures of public-affairs television should make viewers feel they were not just *learning about* a story, but *experiencing it* through the eyes of the reporter. A *Newsmagazine* feature on art schools, for instance, had camera operators dangling out of windows, laying at dirt level, and pushing cameras around on toy wagons to give the impression of “going in there with Harry [Rassky]” (*CBC Times*, 1955b). By methods such as these, viewers were encouraged to enter the psychic process of identification by delegating their look to reporters and hosts of the day.3

All of this was conceived with something more than an educational intent, and was clearly at odds with the Corporation’s rather austere instructional mandate. Harry Rassky summed up the new direction of public-affairs television with a story about a viewer catching up with him on the street and giving him a hug for having captured the (then-notorious) Boyd Gang of Toronto. “Somehow the fact that I was the one who brought the story vividly into her living room was confused with the actual arrest,” he explained (1953). Apocryphal or not, such stories indicate the degree to which producers expected, and sometimes encouraged, emotionally involved (and sometimes cognitively confused) pleasures of public affairs. Information television was clearly designed to attract fans, not just citizens.

**Documentary images and documentary stories**

Documentary television veered even further away from modern disciplinary theory in the ways it used sounds, images, and story structures to get its message across. Of course, formal experimentation, like personalization, was tentative at the CBC, and public-affairs programs could be highly conventional stylistically. Qualified personnel were in short supply, which obviously curtailed the development of a public-affairs television aesthetic. Moreover, experimentation, such as it was, had to be conducted within the confines of a rigid organizational structure.
All camera and sound work, for instance, was supplied by a centralized and aesthetically rigid CBC film unit and engineering department. Innovators were also kept in line by ratings pressures. The experimental arts and documentary series Scope, for instance, was dropped by four affiliates and carried by others only under protest in the 1955 season (CBC National Program Office minutes, 1955, p. 3).

Producers themselves frequently viewed public-affairs shows as no-nonsense instructional devices with little room for stylistic play. Most had gotten their start in radio and struggled to imagine programs visually, let alone experimentally. Rules concerning how sounds and images were to be used and stories told were certainly restrictive by today’s standards. In technical journals such as Radio, for instance, film editors were advised that dissolves, fades, and rapid transitions would lend acceptable vitality to the shows, while jump-cuts were to be avoided because they might make the interview subject’s head spin around, causing the viewer to become disoriented (Wright, 1954a). Close-ups and broad, simple designs were recommended because of limited resolution of TV screens, so as to not unduly tax the eyes of the viewer (Wright, 1954b). Graphics should be “pleasing to the eye,” remarked Tabloid’s Jack Kruper in 1953, “but they must never obtrude themselves on the observer. . . . They must never detract or compete with the story.”

With respect to sound, producers were advised to seek out appropriate ambient noises in lieu of the more remote non-synch narrations of Canadian documentary films. Excessive multitrack recording was discouraged due to receiver limitations, as were sounds that could not be immediately identified and clearly matched with the stripped-down images on the screen (Normandin, 1956). Music, for its part, should help guide the viewer through the narrative structure of the show, serving as a bridge between story items, between stories and commercials, between opening and closing segments and the body of the show, and between the constantly juxtaposed live studio and (usually) recorded location sites of television actuality (CBC Times, 1955a). Constant collaboration was recommended to ensure that these various levels of signification worked together to produce coherent meanings in public-affairs television.

By some accounts, images, sounds, and graphics worked just this way. Critic Marion Lepkin, for instance, praised the documentary program Explorations for “really using the medium . . . [with] cartoons, lectures and film clips and dramatic skits and graphs . . . in short everything but the kitchen sink, but all of a piece, with not a rag or a tatter anywhere” (1956a). At the same time, critics and producers themselves worried that this new razzmatazz world of multiplying signifiers and diegetic fields might not always make sense. Some degree of confusion was to be expected according to Gilbert Seldes: the best that producers could hope for was a sort of low-key engagement, a fine line between audience stimulation and techno-fatigue or even schizoid dissociation (1952, p. 189). Many critics called for more semiotic and narrative regulation at the CBC. Miriam Waddington of Canadian Forum complained in 1956 that images and sounds were straying
from a linear, educational path, with “words pulling one way and pictures another” (1956). The CBC’s own technical officer had complained two years earlier that editing in the programs was often “deplorable . . . inject[ing] synthetic action into shows by a series of unmotivated cuts” (Wright, 1954a). Similarly, the Corporation’s National Program Office noted that graphics “often competed with stories” and that scripts were often devoid of any logic other than building a bridge between program items and commercials (CBC National Program Office Minutes, 1953, pp. 7-8).

Many observers in fact believed that public-affairs television was in a state of crisis in its earliest years. It was not just that television was now teaching by dramatic and pictorial effect. Or that stories were veering away from traditional expository structures. Or even that established literary principles of representation had been superseded by an unruly televisual aesthetic. For many, public-affairs television simply no longer represented Canada in a meaningful and informative way. The new programs “might be sensational,” noted one critic, but they “hardly helped viewers make sense of their world” (Lepkin, 1956a).

An example: Women’s television magazines
Inane language, sensational editing, excessive graphic embellishment, the unleashing of audiovisual signs in an attempt to please or excite the viewer—all represented for many critics Canadian public-affairs television’s dangerous slide into generic disorder in the early 1950s. Canadians had witnessed their public broadcaster’s “final embrace of U.S. commercial values,” as one 1953 critic put it (Sangster, 1953a). Women’s TV magazines represented, for many, the worst of these excesses.

The shows themselves were introduced to Canadian television in 1954 partly because of complaints from critics about soap operas, partly because of demands from advertisers for consumer-oriented programs. As daytime magazines such as NBC’s Today Show took off in the United States, CBC programmers came to believe that the Canadian housewife would soon learn to “plan her day around her set and the information it provided” (Gillis, 1958).6

Critics of all stripes agreed that women’s shows brought entirely new subjects and styles to Canadian information television. Programs such as Living introduced informal film features on fashion, gardening, and home decoration, as well as social and political affairs. Place aux dames and Pour Elle, on the French network, mixed women’s reports with songs and variety sketches. On the English network, Open House and later Take 30 covered everything from cooking to sexuality to international affairs in a personable and direct way. More than other programs, the daytime shows mixed filmed reports with live pictures, and toward the end of the decade used lighter and more mobile video cameras to give their programs a more intimate and immediate feel. Female producers such as Graphic’s Jo Kerwin also introduced more subjective approaches to public affairs, offering “thought-sync” programs in which audiovisual tracks conveyed not just information about the outside world but the inner feelings of program subjects.
For some observers, the programs were a welcome addition to the documentary form. Ohio University, for instance, somewhat patronizingly awarded its “special interest” award to Open House, citing the show’s “mood-evoking use of intimate camera and restrained commentary” (CBC Times, 1961). Such praise was not unknown, but in Canada the shows were the subject of much derision in the quality press. Critics complained of their frenetic pace: “Eight minutes of this, 10 minutes of that . . . Is women’s attention really so short?” asked one reviewer in 1953 (Sangster, 1953a). Others noted the shows’ flagrant commercialism and their self-promotional inserts to keep viewers glued to the set (Sangster, 1953a). Still others condemned the programs’ “unrestrained imagery” and their “melodramatic” story structures (Korwin, 1956).

Critics worried that the new programs degraded Canada’s patriarchal public space and the various competencies it demanded of its citizens. “By the time these programs are finished,” commented one 1953 reviewer, “everyone with a TV set is reduced to a mass of quivering sentimental jelly” (Singer, 1953). New rules of representation thus seemed to call into question the most basic (mostly gendered) distinctions on which public-service broadcasting had been founded in Canada: distinctions between pedagogy and pleasure; between culture and commerce; and, of course, between public and private affairs.

**Factual authority in public-affairs programming**

Finally, and somewhat paradoxically, modern principles of representation were undermined by television’s increasingly systematic and ambitious investigations of the times and spaces of the nation. Public-affairs television was clearly promoted by the CBC as a uniquely authoritative document of Canadian life: one whose audiovisual technologies and professionalized investigative practices would produce entirely new sounds and images of Canada. “As a symbol of TV’s ability to roam the country we display the TV camera,” announced the CBC Times in 1953, complete with an inventory of lenses and attachments “able to do for the TV image roughly what binoculars and a small telescope can do for a spectator’s vision” (1953a). Some programs, such as Close-Up, offered uniquely intrusive pictures: searching new looks into unexamined areas of Canadian social experience. Others, such as Explorations, promised more extensive types of representation—sociological journalism with which to explore the whole fabric of modern existence (CBC Times, 1954c). Representation as such was at least implicitly contrasted with the provincialism and perceptual limitations of everyday experience. “Canada like you’ve never seen it before,” promised the magazine program Graphic, pointing to its 100 receiver feeds from all along the new transnational microwave network (CBC Times, 1954b). Public-affairs programs thus seemed to promise not just the pleasures of delegation—with programs serving as the next best thing to being there—but excitement of mastery: new sorts of modernist meta-experience that were more like being everywhere like never before.

For some viewers, however, such programs also called into question the very possibility of representation in Canada. The mixture of pleasure and anxiety with
which investigative public-affairs programs were received in Canada is indeed quite striking. In the wake of investigative reports by programs such as Close-Up, for instance, one critic wondered if Canadian social institutions were “entirely decrepit” and what purpose these programs served, whatever the case (Merter, 1955). Others questioned the possibility of containing a national narrative within an orderly televisual framework of representation, one columnist noting that “obvious differences [in Canada] are played down,” with Canadian television resorting to “Madison Avenue simplifications of our communities” (Low, 1956). Other critics were led to question the very existence of a Canadian way of life, at least as it had been represented in advertisements and sociology textbooks: “I rarely see what I thought I knew,” noted Marion Lepkin in 1956. Was the critic “‘seeing things’ at home or on television[?]” (1956c). In dysfunctional moments such as these, public-affairs programs seemed to offer a simulacrum of Canadian life: a set of representational ideals, perhaps, but no real referent. To paraphrase Baudrillard, perhaps before his time, Canada seemed to occasionally disappear under the weight of its own representation (1986). This was indeed the modern paradox of public-service broadcasting in Canada, that in the wake of its ever more professionalized and systematic investigations of everyday life, Canadian television seemed ever less capable of representing the nation to itself.

Conclusion

So what does all this tell us about public-service broadcasting as a modern project in Canada? One might argue, “Not much.” One might dismiss the middle-ground experiment as mere neo-paternalism, for instance: as plain old public-service broadcasting with a showbiz veneer, born out of a desperation to keep American commercial television at bay. And one might argue, as have many researchers, that pleasure always remained instrumental to Canadian television’s pedagogic framework (see, for example, Collins, 1990). Indeed, one might conclude that despite its allowance for new modes of address and new opportunities for audience identification, Canadian television remained firmly dedicated to the task of using sounds and images to make sense of all aspects of Canadian life for all Canadians in more or less predictable ways. In fact, such a view probably fairly sums up the hopes of the original architects of Canada’s public-service television service.

But clearly the middle-ground experiment was never so neat and easily contained as that. The Canadian service, for instance, never managed to systematically contain meanings and pleasures within fixed liberal-patriarchal boundaries. Nor did it manage to consistently and effectively police television’s semiotic systems, to harness its images, sounds, and graphics to the logic of the written word. Nor, finally, did it seem able to maintain a strictly modernist set of distinctions between pedagogy and pleasure, between the sensational and the sublime, between ostensibly public and private modes of representation. In short, Canadian television, in its defining genre, and even in its golden age, fell well short of its high modernist ideals.

Of course, public-service broadcasting in Canada may have been exceptional in this regard. “Middle ground” television may have been a natural site for the
“queering” of semiotic protocols and the epistemological and moral boundaries of modernist television. My point, however, is simply that the monolithic periodization that has come to dominate European and American media histories, based on a clear-cut, relatively contained “modern era” of television, does not really apply in the Canadian case. Here—and perhaps elsewhere?—the relationship between television and modernity was never so straightforward.

Notes
1. See, for example, Ien Ang’s argument that public-service broadcasting has recently drifted toward populism after having regimented and segmented its audience for years. Ang’s account, like most, is based entirely on British and European research.
2. The report also noted, however, that “television may come to concentrate on its more immediate popular capacities,...leaving more serious programs to radio and film” (p. 304), which suggests that commercial pressures on Canadian television were widely acknowledged at the time. For a view of the Massey Commission as a liberal-humanist project, see Litt (1992).
3. Newsmagazine’s Harry Rassky offered himself less as an announcer than an investigator, spending most of his time uncovering stories where they happened. “My job is to take viewers with me on adventures,” he explained (CBC Times, 1955b).
4. The public-affairs show Graphic was also reportedly cancelled, to appease the 1957 Fowler Commission and its demands for more commercially sustainable programming (CBC National Program Office Minutes, 1955, p. 3).
5. The exceptions included producers such as Sidney Newman, who drew freely on the New York tradition of live location programming (which he had studied at NBC in the late 1940s as an intern for the NFB). Others such as Thom Benson developed a more dramatic public-affairs approach based on their work in the Canadian theatre.
6. As CBC Supervisor Doddi Robb put it later, only daytime magazines treated women as “intelligent, lively and curious people who like to think and learn and know” (CBC Times, 1965).
7. For a similar argument in an American context, see Spigel (1996).
8. Public-service television models are clearly Eurocentric in this regard. Collins, for instance, sees Europe to be the heartland of what came to be known as public-service broadcasting, with that continent’s supposed dedication to pedagogic/disciplinary culture taken as a prototype for public-service broadcasting everywhere (1998, p. 55). Though more sympathetic to the public-service cause, Blumer (1992) offers his own general model based on discussions at a 1990 Pan-European conference in Liege.

Postmodern television theories often take this Eurocentric caricature at face value and use it to build theories of their own. Ang’s (1991, 1996) view of postmodern television offers a model of modern public-service broadcasting based entirely on European (and mostly British) case studies, and thus produces a convenient binary opposite to support her theory of a radical break with the cultural past.

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