Chasing the Public: The CBC and the Debate Over Factual Entertainment on Canadian Airwaves

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Abstract: This article focuses on the public debate surrounding the CBC as it began to program reality TV. It highlights the tension between a public broadcaster’s popular programming and the expectations of a cultural nationalist public that seeks to hold the institution accountable. It argues for the existence of a “CBC effect” and questions whether the transnational format of reality television on Canada’s national broadcaster augurs changes in Canadian public culture.

Keywords: Broadcasting (public/private); Cultural nationalism; Media publics

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, reality television became an ascendant force in network programming across the globe. In North America, private broadcasters flocked to the format. However, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) refused to join the fray. Even as critics bemoaned the glut of reality television on private networks, reality TV provided the CBC’s competition with a high return on their investment, attracting large audiences and advertising revenue. Consequently, the CBC could not ignore the trend forever.

In 2003, the broadcaster created a “Current Affairs Redevelopment Group” tasked with incorporating “reality-type ideas” into its programming. However, Slawko Klymkiw, then executive director of network programming, was adamant...
that “[w]e don’t actually use the term ‘reality’ television.” Instead, reported Alexandra Gill in the *Globe and Mail,* “he prefers to call it constructive observational documentary, or counterintuitive programming” (Gill, 2003). Two years later, as reported by *Toronto Star* television critic Antonia Zerbisias (2005), CBC president and CEO Robert Rabinovitch told Parliament’s Heritage Committee, “There are certain types of programming that we don’t have to do, or shouldn’t do. For example, we don’t do reality television. . . . If we just were chasing audiences, or just were chasing rating points, we could do reality programming. . . . But we don’t do that.” Then, less than a year later, the broadcaster created a “Factual Entertainment” division. For the CBC, this meant “talk shows, game shows, lifestyle and reality programs, as well as the acquisition and adaptation of formats of this type” (Stephenson, 2006). In other words, even though reluctant to admit it, the CBC was definitely pursuing reality programming.

This article examines the decision by the CBC to program reality TV in its English television schedule and the public response to this strategy. This decision was part of a campaign begun in 2004 by new management at the CBC to make the broadcaster more popular by making it more populist. Whyte (2006) called the new agenda “perhaps the most radical retooling of CBC television in its history.” The stakes were high for the CBC, since it is expected to do more than simply attract and entertain viewers. As a public broadcaster, it is also charged with representing and serving the public. If it is indistinct from its private competitors, it becomes subject to public scrutiny for being but another source of popular distraction, a vehicle for news and entertainment that need not be supported by taxpayer dollars.

If, on the other hand, it is too distinct from its private competition and their popular programming, the CBC risks alienating audiences. Hence, the CBC finds itself in a perpetual quandary of “chasing the audience,” but doing so in a “responsible” fashion. Communication scholars should ask how the CBC’s quest for larger audiences (and the choice to program “reality TV” in pursuit of such audiences) challenges traditional notions of the Canadian television-viewing public. Considering the cultural significance of “Canadian” reality TV on Canada’s national public broadcaster also prompts questions about how the programming of transnational reality television on the CBC challenges the discourse of cultural nationalism.

Far from the suggestions of those who claim there is no role for programming such as reality TV on the CBC, this article argues that (transnational) reality television on CBC-TV reflects the increasing complexity of a Canadian public that is at least partly transnational. This point of view challenges the more traditional cultural nationalist models that have dominated conceptualizations of CBC publics. Instead of lamenting the CBC’s populist turn, we should recognize that Canadian stories may be more available than ever before given that the definition of “Canadian” is as fluid as the generic definitions of informational and/or entertainment programming. The generic hybridity of “factual entertainment” may or may not be a means of revitalizing Canada’s public broadcaster but, as a motif, it offers a productive entry point into understanding the shifting terrain of audiences for and publics around television.
Much research on television examines audiences. There is less research into television publics. The reason for this is straightforward enough: the “television malaise” thesis (van Zoonen, 2005) defines our common-sense attitude toward the medium. We assume that television is better geared to entertainment then enlightenment. Consequently, we attend to audiences, usually deemed to be a fickle and ephemeral entertainment or consumer-based concept associated with preferences and enjoyment, whereas the public is seen as a political concept associated with reason and judgment and expressing principles with constancy (Attallah, 2002). Of course, this distinction is somewhat artificial given the increasing mediatization of everyday life and notions of audience competence (see also Livingstone, 2005). Still, the goal of audiences is experience, whereas the goal of publics is action. Instead of trying “to prolong the pleasure of the experience or to repeat it, [a public’s] goal is to establish an external norm—a law, rules, methods of procedure—that would itself set the parameters under which people can come together” (Attallah, 2002, p. 103).

So, how do we understand television’s publics? This is a confounding task given that “audiences and publics are often composed of the same viewers [and] we know very much about the former, much less about the latter” (Dayan, 2001, pp. 746-747). To simply compare audiences for public and private broadcasting does not help. To analyze public proclamations about programming on the public broadcaster, however, can be productive. Instead of focusing on the textual or formal characteristics of this programming, we ought to focus on the public debate around it.

This article concentrates on the public relations discourse of the CBC itself, defending and explaining its programming choices. Such a discourse speaks to the CBC’s imagined public and it fuels subsequent debates of television-based publics who mobilize around Canada’s public broadcaster. Indeed, the CBC’s rhetoric constitutes television publics even as it comments on its audience (or lack thereof). Thus, to focus on the CBC’s public proclamations about its programming is to enable a deeper examination of the wider discourse of cultural nationalism. In order to contextualize the debate about reality TV on the CBC, a sampling of commentary from audiences (lay and professional critics alike) is provided. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a sustained focus upon the activity of audiences for such programming or to focus on the context of particular programs. To do so would produce a different argument about the popular reception of television (rather than advance awareness of how publics around television are produced and the consequences of this production). While I have begun to investigate more specific articulations of audience talk about reality TV on the CBC elsewhere (Foster, forthcoming), there is much research to be done into the relationships between specific programming, audiences, publics, and public broadcasters. The argument here is but an initial step in what has the potential to be an unending conversation. To begin, we must first understand the background of public opinion about reality television within which the CBC operates.

**Public perception of reality television**

Reality television has had a long history of being seen as the opposite of “socially significant television.” If there is malaise about television, it is magnified when
it comes to reality television. The idea that it has debased television programming in general is “bluntly summarized in the assessment that variants of reality television comprise ‘the trashiest and most manipulative televisual forms yet invented’” (Andrew Goodwin, quoted in Beattie, 2004, p. 183). Given this general dismissal of the genre, it is easy to see why CBC-TV would shy away from such programming. After all, a public broadcaster ought to be “supported by public funds, ultimately accountable in some legally defined way to the citizenry, and aimed at providing a service to the entire population . . . [and] not apply commercial principles as the primary means to determine its programming” (McChesney, 1999, p. 226). Those who believe in a unique public broadcaster expect it to perform a public service not provided by its private competition and reasonably expect the CBC to avoid reality television, a sign and symptom of clear commercial principles.

Why, even in 2006, was the CBC reluctant to use the term “reality television”? After all, the CBC has never propagated public knowledge to the exclusion of popular culture. As Vipond noted, “While charged with the cultural responsibility of nation-building, it has from the beginning been only one part of an otherwise commercially oriented system, within which it must compete for audiences, money and credibility” (1989, p. 152). However, the quest to attract audiences may detract from the CBC’s credibility if, in its decision to program material that also finds a home on private networks, it becomes just like them. If the CBC is commercially viable, it may be credible competition, but it may also lose its legitimacy as a unique and public-minded broadcaster.

Perhaps one of the things the CBC is trying to avoid is the stigma associated with reality television. As Bruzzi summarizes (2006), much of the genre depends upon conflict highlighted purely for the sake of entertainment and cruelty inflicted on participants who suffer from fear and deprivation and humiliation. Indeed, when Rabinovitch was subsequently confronted with “reality TV” on CBC-TV, he claimed that he had been ambiguous and merely stressed that the network would not do “shows that stress plastic surgery, sex and humiliation [and the] eating of insects” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2006b). It seems then that the CBC, having recognized the attractiveness of the genre as a means to attract audiences, was also reluctant to be associated with a genre in which “the historical world becomes reduced to a set of simulations and idle talk” (Nichols, 2000, p. 394). As a result, the CBC emphasized how it would produce a “better brand” of reality television. As one producer declared, “The genre isn’t going anywhere but there’s plenty of room to make it smarter” (Chris Chilco, quoted in Collins, 2006).

One of the ways the CBC has attempted to make its variety of reality TV smarter and better is to brand it as “factual entertainment.” Factual entertainment is a hybrid genre that “combine[s] ‘hard’ values of information and realism characteristic of news and documentary with ‘softer’, more entertaining topics” (Solier, 2005, p. 46). It is this hybridity that is the source of much uneasiness. The term “factual entertainment” stems from 1990s Britain, where there was a significant rise in this type of programming, especially its “two main strands, the ‘docu-soap’ and the range of programmes known as ‘documentary lite’ and
lifestyle programming such as programmes about fashion, gardening, cookery, home decorating, do-it-yourself home improvement and personal makeovers” (Brundson, Johnson, Moseley, & Wheatley, 2001, p. 31).

It is worth noting that of the broadcasters in Canada, only the CBC has flirted with the term “factual entertainment.” The disparity in the labelling belies the fluidity of the content. For instance, after being a ratings disappointment on the CBC, *Making the Cut* was refashioned as *Making the Cut: Last Man Standing* and broadcast on Global TV. Similarly, after debuting on CTV as *The Next Great Prime Minister*, the same show format subsequently reappeared as *Canada’s Next Great Prime Minister* on the CBC. With such examples in mind, theoretically, there’s no reason why commercial broadcasters would not also deploy the term for their programming. Yet perhaps because of its pedigree with other national public broadcasters, perhaps because it smacks of a certain disingenuousness stemming from the mixing of its two categories, or perhaps because private broadcasters generally feel no qualm about programming the type of narcissistic spectacles and humiliation-based shows that the CBC avowedly avoids, the public broadcaster is unique in using the term “factual entertainment.”

One could make the argument, however, that the popular fare on commercial channels need not be contradistinctive to a public service mandate. According to one perspective, “The CBC should not abandon attempts to exhibit popular programming that appeals to large Canadian audiences. Much is to be gained by attracting significant audiences to programming set in Canada and dealing with Canadian subjects” (Feldthu sen, 1993, p. 72). Reality television can be a means to do just this. *Making the Cut*, for instance, was a “reality type” series billed as a 13-part “hockeymentary” that dealt with that most Canadian of fascinations, hockey and the quest to break into the NHL. Less stereotypically “Canadian” reality programming on the CBC, imported from elsewhere and adapted using Canadian settings and personalities, includes *Test the Nation*, *Dragon’s Den, No Opportunity Wasted, The Week the Women Went*, and *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?*

There is no reason why these shows cannot satisfy the condition of providing compelling television to, by, for, and about Canadians. The question, quite simply, is whether the broadcaster’s desire for audiences detracts from the public service mandate. Traditionally, one might argue, yes. “Whereas once the public constituted the audience for serious political media, today, the public is eroding as audiences have become no more than markets, commodities, eyeballs to be bought, sold and traded” (Grossberg, Wartella, & Whitney, 1998, p. 361). One could argue that this is exactly what is happening at the current CBC. Still, others persist in arguing that this quest for audiences actually democratizes a public broadcaster that simply services niche audiences under the aegis of providing edifying public service. Even the CBC has propagated this view. As CBC reality programmer Pia Marquard declared, “A nurse who’s married to a guy who works in a factory and they have two kids and get up at 7 in the morning and have to rush to get the subway. What do they want to watch at 9 on Tuesday evening? It’s a different thing than the guy who drives to work in his BMW. And we have a responsibility to them, too” (Whyte, 2004).
The CBC’s refashioning of its broadcast schedule is due in part to the economics of both reality television and public broadcasting. Quite frankly, it is cheaper to program television that feeds the stereotypical appetites of subway-taking nurses and factory workers than those of BMW drivers. An editorial in The Toronto Star noted how government funding “has fallen by 20 per cent in the past 15 years when inflation is taken into account. Indeed, only the United States and New Zealand give less government money per person to their national public broadcasters” (“What Is Best Role for CBC Today?” 2007). Reality television is cost-effective programming and a “no-brainer” (pun intended) as a means to attract greater revenue. As the CBC president noted, “CBC’s English Television receives a little more than a quarter of the Corporation’s total Government funding. The rest of its budget, more than 50 per cent, is derived from commercial operations . . . The reality is that CBC Television is only partly a public broadcaster” (Rabinovitch, 2006). Confronted by the prospects of continually diminished funding, CBC executives have turned to reality TV/factual entertainment just as public broadcasters in other countries have done.

This is not the first attempt to broaden the symbolic appeal of CBC-TV. “In the 1950s and 1960s managers and producers at CBC-TV hoped they would be able to offer a complete service, including ‘something distinctive in the entertainment field’ to Canadian viewers. . . . In 1960 the president of the CBC . . . declared that ‘Canadian culture’ embraces everything from sled-dog races to symphony orchestras, from comedy to opera, from good talks to jazz” (Rutherford, 1993, p. 274). The twenty-first-century move toward more popular programming in the form of factual entertainment represents an updating of this vision. And, though some may question whether reality television provides a public service, distinctively Canadian or not, there are many reasons why it should be featured on a public broadcaster.

This is partly due to the fluid meaning of “public”: “No term in understanding mass media is more vital than ‘the public’” (Grossberg et al., 1998, p. 357) and different actors use the term differently. For instance, public can mean the “not-private”—what goes on in the open and is observable by and accessible to others. It can also mean the “general”—pertaining to or emanating from all citizens (as in public interest or public opinion). Finally, public often invokes “communal”—meaning governmentally owned or regulated (as in public television or public utilities) (Grossberg et al., 1998, p. 357). So, when Kristine Layfield, CBC Television’s executive director of network programming, defends reality TV as a means of spurring ratings growth, she says, “I think people understand that a public broadcaster needs to serve the public” (Nestruck, 2006). This is a refashioning of “communal” in the mode of the “general,” a move that troubles those who don’t see popular public opinion and the public good as being necessarily coterminous.

Richard Stursberg, the executive vice-president of CBC Television and the individual most likely associated with the thrust behind reality television on the CBC, admitted how the programming choice was indebted to the British experience: “There is a growing acceptance that our programming must be entertaining and fun as well as intelligent, interesting and engaging. Public service broadcasting can no longer be, as the UK Government White Paper on the BBC says and
I quote, confined to the ‘worthy’” (Stursberg, 2006). With this in mind, we can look to Bignell’s (2005, p. 47) characterization of the British Broadcasting Corporation to understand the changes underway at the CBC: Both institutions are “shifting from a paternalistic notion of the viewer as a member of a collective national audience to the notion of the viewer as increasingly an individual consumer.” No longer content with marginal ratings due to attempts at “supervising the viewer’s cultural education towards ‘better’ taste and informed citizenship,” now “public service” entails the “attempt to satisfy perceived desires and capture large audiences through entertainment.” The challenge that Stursberg faces, above and beyond simply drawing viewers away from private networks, is to get viewers to watch “Canadian” television. As the vice-president admits, “[W]hen it comes to the most popular forms of narrative—television and feature films—Canadians overwhelmingly prefer the stories of another country” (Stursberg, 2006). Although this may not be true of all Canadians, viewer ratings feature rare domestic successes but a sustained appetite for imported American programming. Thus, even as it programs reality TV, the CBC operates under the pressure to reflect Canadian life and tell Canadian stories.

It is perhaps telling, then, that when confronted by public rebukes of its programming of reality television, the CBC first denied that it was doing reality TV and then admitted that it was doing so, but under the auspices of “factual entertainment.” This was more than just a semantic shift; the alternative label signified that the format was not something to be feared, per se, because although it had its origins outside of our own borders, it wasn’t, after all, an American invasion. Stursberg defended the factual entertainment department noting that the type of reality shows they would produce were in the vein of those “invented by the great European public broadcasters. The BBC most notably has used the reality format not just to entertain, but also to explore complicated social issues and engage its audience in difficult and controversial subject matter” (Stursberg, 2007).

However, this still leaves the CBC open to two lines of criticism. In England, the trend toward factual entertainment was understood to represent “a concession to populism at the expense of the BBC’s public service remit” (Bondebjerg, 1996, p. 41), and the CBC has come under similar fire for its deployment of reality television. But beyond the questioning of “the public” in “public” broadcasting, there is also the questioning of “the national” in the CBC’s role as “national public broadcaster.” For instance, just as we have seen “the globalization of popular factual television as formats are sold from country to country, modified and repackaged” (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 137), we should recognize that it is not just specific programs that are exported or adapted for domestic broadcast. The entire formula of factual entertainment is an imported phenomenon. With this in mind, some have suggested that “the rise of reality programming . . . raises questions about just how innovative broadcasters are in trying to create a unique Canadian television culture” (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006, p. 75). Let us deal with both of these criticisms in turn.

**Reality TV and the “dumbing down” of the CBC**

Underwhelming ratings for many CBC broadcasts has led to increasing pressure to become more competitive, to attract viewers away from the public broad-
caster’s private competition and to move beyond its traditional audience. Stursberg (2007) encapsulates the network’s new agenda: “We succeed most fully when the largest number of Canadians are moved, informed or entertained by our shows. . . . We do not need to choose between intelligent programs and popular success.” Stursberg equates CBC viewers’ preferences with the popular in order to disassociate the broadcaster from the charge of elitism. Notably, the 2008 decision to reduce the amount of classical music on Radio 2 and to disband the CBC Radio Orchestra indicate these are CBC-wide shifts, not just pressures felt by English television programmers. The CBC’s goal is to produce popular programming and thereby induce the public to once again turn to the CBC in greater numbers, thus legitimizing its label as a “public broadcaster.” However, the programming shift does not placate those who prefer that the CBC’s mix of enlightenment and entertainment emphasize the former and not the latter. One-time CBC executive Patrick Watson, creator of the “seminal avant-garde current affairs show in the late ’60s, This Hour Has Seven Days,” chastised the move toward reality TV as “simply going after viewers with the cheapest possible form of social pornography” (Whyte, 2004).

In fact, a program such as This Hour Has Seven Days could easily be termed factual entertainment of its era, designed to keep the public informed of events of the day, but doing so in an engaging manner. Current “news-y” offerings that may be classified as factual entertainment (such as The Hour, This Hour Has 22 Minutes, and The Rick Mercer Report) merely take the Griersonian edict to present a “creative treatment of actuality” and pump up the “creativity” with a steroid-fuelled vigour. Given this, criticism of the genre tends to focus on the catenation of “factual” and “entertainment.” Many fear not only that reality television debases viewers, but also that the entire format of “factual entertainment” threatens the traditional sobriety associated with the public broadcaster. Commercial networks escape this criticism. Unlike public broadcasters, they are not tasked with keeping viewers “attuned to issues and developments in the world about which we, as dutiful citizens, might wish to be kept informed” (Kilborn, 2003, p. 124). The CBC is expected to provide not just interesting television but valuable television too. This can be seen in the following commentary in which the CBC’s performance arts showcase/competition/talent show Triple Sensation is contextualized via reference to other programs on private networks and the “style” of other public networks:

Triple Sensation is trying to find that one performer who can sing, dance and act. Think Grease: I’m The One That I Want [sic], but less cheeseball since its [sic] produced by the CBC, or American Idol meets So You Think You Can Dance plus acting thrown in, but again, produced by the CBC. For those non-Canadians out there, produced by the CBC means . . . well . . . it’s well done, if a little documentary like (ahem . . . sometimes you could say dry). Think BBC meets PBS. (Tapeworthy, 2007)

This comment demonstrates the expectation that public broadcasters’ programming is, traditionally, not as entertaining as that of their private competition. It also underscores the general impression that public broadcasting ought to be serious and enlightening (if not outright educational). The expectation that the
CBC ought to educate Canadian viewers is indeed a source of tension when it comes to reality TV. However, it is not part of the CBC’s mandate to educate. The broadcaster is, however, tasked with contributing “to shared national consciousness and identity” through “a wide range of programming that informs, enlightens and entertains” (Canada, 1991). In this capacity, the CBC can still act as an instrument of education. As the Royal Commission on Radio Broadcasting suggested in its recommendation to create the Canadian Radio Broadcast Commission, the forerunner of the CBC, a publicly funded broadcast system can provide “[e]ducation in the broad sense; not only as it is conducted in the schools and colleges, but in providing entertainment and informing the public on questions of national interest” (Canada, 1929, p. 6). Though some criticize the format of factual entertainment programming for its execution of this ideal, its hybrid capacity to entertain and inform is clearly the source of its cachet for the CBC’s Stursberg and others.

**Reality TV and distinctive Canadian culture on the CBC**

Speaking of the CBC invariably means getting embroiled in debates over culture and nationality. Obviously, those who are concerned with Canadian culture attend to the CBC as the country’s national public broadcaster, expecting it to represent Canada’s national interests and calling upon it to resist extra-national forces. However, it is dangerous to characterize everyone who supports the CBC as a cultural nationalist or to suggest that cultural nationalism is tied strictly to institutions such as the CBC or National Film Board (NFB). Indeed, “it would not be fair to say that private broadcasters are necessarily at odds with cultural nationalists, as they too argue for governmental measures to protect their rights over the broadcasting system to ensure Canadian ownership” (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006, p. 11). Because of its mandate, the CBC finds itself the target of most nationalist rhetoric, but populism and nationalism alike have been mobilized in response to its programming, as indicated by the following quote:

> In terms of programming, the CBC has been faulted simultaneously for both élitism and pandering to the masses. On the one hand, many Canadians feel that it has over-emphasized serious and high-culture programming. . . . On the other hand, intellectual and cultural élites who look to the CBC to provide enriching fare distinguishable from that offered by other broadcasters have frequently condemned the CBC for buying popular American programming to schedule in prime time to attract audiences and advertisers. (Vipond, 1989, pp. 148-149)

It is the latter group that typically is associated with cultural nationalism. As a broad overview, the cultural nationalist public views “Canadian culture” as a good thing. The discourse of cultural nationalism in Canada recognizes that while most Canadians purport a strong identification with both Canadian culture and nationalist identity, they overwhelmingly prefer American popular culture on their airwaves. “Television, for many Canadian nationalists, is the Trojan horse of ‘continentalism’ par excellence that most threatens the anterior values of Canadian-ness” (Collins, 1990, p. 121). The CBC, then, is meant to be an antidote to this situation. And when an institution such as the CBC, tasked with a
public service mandate, features American programming (much less American reality-style programming), this is a cause for concern.

Nowhere was this concern more evident than in the widespread rebuke that confronted CBC’s decision to broadcast The One: Making a Music Star. An adaptation of a format that had already proven successful in other television markets, The One debuted (and departed from) the airwaves in July 2006. It was a production of the U.S. commercial broadcaster ABC, designed to combat the supremacy of the musical variety–talent show American Idol on FOX. For a variety of reasons, including poor character development, poor production quality, unfamiliar show format, and being deemed to be a poor derivative of its more entrenched competition, the program suffered from disastrous ratings and was quickly pulled from the air.

In the United States, the program was, by and large, quickly forgotten. Even while it was on the air, it was not the source of much debate. This was not the case in Canada, given that CBC personality George Stroumboulopoulos hosted the U.S. production and, more importantly, the fact that CBC-TV had agreed to simulcast the series in the hopes of building an audience for its own home-grown version of the show planned for subsequent broadcast. As a result of this decision, in certain parts of the country, the CBC was forced to reschedule The National, its flagship news program, for one night per week. So not only were English Canadians confronted by foreign (American), commercial content on their national public broadcaster, in some cases they also had to suffer the displacement of more “dignified” content.

Interestingly, the CBC defended its actions by drawing attention to the European origins of the show. A spokesperson for the president of the network argued, “The format for The One is identical to BBC1’s very successful Fame Academy.” Trina McQueen, representing the CBC’s board of directors, also noted the BBC connection before trumpeting “a version in Quebec called Star Académie which is a great success” (Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, 2006). However, such rhetorical justifications did not wipe away the taint of American commercialism. A spokesperson for the Friends of Canadian Broadcasting declared, “[W]e don’t want public broadcasters going around trying to emulate our private broadcasters” (Lofaro, 2006). Former CBC journalist Knowlton Nash also lambasted the decision. He argued, “If the CBC really wants reality TV, let people get the reality of what’s happening in the world by turning on The National at 10 p.m. every night” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2006a). Both comments are representative of the popular view that the CBC’s decision was a repudiation of the broadcaster’s ethical commitment to Canadians.

Given this view, we ought to go beyond asking about the effects of reality TV and examine the process by which reality television on CBC-TV serves to highlight what might be termed the “CBC effect.” This is inspired by Dickinson’s discussion of “The Pleasantville Effect,” whereby he describes how a movie can have rhetorical and ethical force. Quoting from Carole Blair and Neil Michel’s description of Mount Rushmore, he notes, “More than just the images on the mountain, [Mount Rushmore] is, instead, the accumulation of texts, histories, narratives, and public interpretations of and about Rushmore” (Dickinson, 2006,
Similarly, CBC television is not just a material thing—a broadcast network, a collection of programming choices, and so forth. It is an assortment of voices and images that is a selection and a representation of what it means to be Canadian.

The “CBC effect,” then, is at least twofold: There is an aesthetic or visual effect that pertains to the ways audiences imagine themselves through viewing the network’s content. In other words, the CBC literally influences how viewers see their nation and themselves. There is also a political and ethical effect. More than “just” a network, the CBC is greater than the sum of its parts in that “it is an advocate in the conversation about who and how we should be as a nation” (Dickinson, 2006, p. 215). The CBC shows what Canada looks like (an aesthetic effect) and its programming, by virtue of its place on our national public broadcaster, depicts what actions are important to living a good “Canadian” life (a political and rhetorical, specifically ethical, effect).

It is especially important in the case of national public broadcasting to note how the political effect is also ethical. To do so is to suggest that we understand “the ethos of rhetoric” to refer to the way discourse is used to transform space and time into ‘dwelling places’ where people can deliberate about and ‘know together’ some matter of interest” (Hyde, 2004, p. xii). The CBC offers images and narratives that audiences can use to make sense of themselves as Canadians, and a place where images of Canada and Canadian imaginations come together. These, in turn, do more than reflect Canadian identity; they help to constitute it. In so doing, the ethos of public broadcasting and the CBC provides more than just the opportunity to produce “quality” programming. It also conditions ways of thinking about the normal and proper representation of culture in Canada. Crucially, it provides a “dwelling place” where Canadians feel good about themselves and feel good about their consumption of that particular brand of Canada. The CBC understands this and has communicated it quite literally: “We’re committed to making CBC TV a place where Canadians feel at home, where they see themselves, their interests, their values and their country come alive. . . . We’re determined to make popular, relevant programming that reflects where we live and who we are, so that when Canadians come to CBC, they’re coming home” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007).

The cultural nationalist public organizes itself around a claim to this ethos. In Canada, the public is constituted by the claims-making of politicians and public figures as well as advocacy organizations such as the Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, and industry-oriented pressure groups such as ACTRA (Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists) and the Canadian Media Guild. It is important to note, however, that the public exceeds all of these institutions. Following Warner (2002), a public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. Like an audience, it exists by virtue of being addressed. Like the “CBC effect,” the cultural nationalist public is a discursive construct with real power. Just as crucially as it depends upon and advances the “CBC effect,” the cultural nationalist public helps construct a nationalist subject(ivity) wherein Canadian television is constantly being seduced by American infotainment. Consequently, cultural nationalists tend to argue against
a “too-populist” notion of public service in which the idea of “the” public is defined by demographics, viewer statistics, and ad revenue. This vision, they suggest, makes Canadian culture indistinguishable from other national or transnational variants.

We can see the “CBC effect” even in the network’s own declarations that it does “factual entertainment” rather than reality TV: When the CBC promoted its fall 2007 line-up of “successful, smart and popular reality TV,” it declared, “We are creating a distinctively Canadian model for reality shows called Factual Entertainment. Our strategy is to build thoughtful and intelligent programs” (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2007). Again, we see the ethos of the public broadcaster and the “CBC effect” with the hubris that these shows can be distinctively Canadian. It is clear, too, that CBC programmers presume their content will be distinct from reality shows on commercial networks that may be successful but are not smart. The CBC’s reality shows are not meant to be “just” entertainment. They are designed to provide social and cultural uplift.

Shows such as Triple Sensation or Test the Nation successfully re-inscribe the “CBC effect” given that they don’t carry with them the taint of the “‘bad ordinary’ (content deemed vulgar and/or personally disappointing in ways unsuited to national visibility)” (Corner, 2005, p. xiv). But other shows on the CBC have been accused of this when the quest to be popular appears to detract from the “smart-ness” of the programming. One critic called No Opportunity Wasted “Some Time Wasted” (Menon, 2007) while another used it to suggest that “maybe CBC could try to overcome its fear of intelligent television” (Doyle, 2007). This last comment challenges the public broadcaster to consider whether, having overcome its fear of the “dumb” genre of reality television, its efforts to elevate the format merely reproduce it. Curiously enough, both No Opportunity Wasted and Triple Sensation are programs that are not automatically identifiable as “Canadian.” They look as though they could be produced anywhere (and indeed, the Canadian version of No Opportunity Wasted was the third “distinctly national” iteration of the format, following American and New Zealand productions). This demonstrates an important point:

We live in a time of fractures and heterogeneity, of segmentations inside each nation and of fluid communications with transnational orders of information, style, and knowledge. In the middle of this heterogeneity we find codes that unify us, or at least permit us to understand ourselves . . . these codes are less and less of ethnicity, class, or the nation into which we were born. (Garcia Canclini, quoted by Lull, 2001, p. 142)

The CBC’s own proclamations seem to begrudgingly acknowledge this phenomenon. Perhaps the CBC’s turn toward reality television does not simply represent an attempt to demonstrate its competitiveness in the commercial marketplace. Instead, its programming of “factual entertainment” might itself be a recognition that “[i]ndividuals don’t live in all-embracing, full-time cultures. . . Instead, they invent multiple, simultaneous, part-time polycultural composites made up of accessible cultural resources” (Lull, 2001, p. 133). Reality TV is one such resource. All too accessible for some critics, formed out of global commercial forces and often packaging culture in transnational formats, the CBC’s pro-
programming of this product is a renouncement, to some degree, of “official” and/or “national culture.” As such, it is a tacit recognition of the existence of a Canadian appetite for what Lull calls “supercultures.” These are individually driven mixtures of “features from the seemingly anonymous ‘supermodern’ world and from cultural debris scattered about in what is often called the ‘postmodern’ world, but they are also made up of more enduring, substantive cultural traits and traditions” (Lull, 2001, pp. 133-134). Hence, in its attempts to proactively appeal to a cosmopolitan citizenship, the CBC produces an image of the nation, albeit one that is at odds with the traditional image advocated by the cultural nationalist public.

Cultural nationalism versus the transnational

Cultural nationalists who hold onto traditional codes of national identity find the codes of transnational culture potentially disruptive. There is, of course, no furor over Canadian adaptations that thoroughly disguise their foreign inspiration. However, cases such as The One, in which foreign content is directly imported onto our domestic screens, are quite another issue. Such cases demonstrate that the twenty-first-century response to reality television continues to express the fear, like Archibald MacMechan warned in 1920, of “spiritual bondage—the subjection of the Canadian nation’s mind and soul to the mind and soul of the United States” (Rutherford, 1993, p. 269). This denies the fact that most reality television is transnational and derived from sources other than the United States. Even still, fears of continentalism continue to trump fears of “globalism” or “transnationalism.” National(ist) narratives that circulate around reality programming demonstrate the resilience of nationhood and national identity even in an age of cosmopolitan citizenship in which boundaries of the global, the local, and the national are constantly shifting.

Interestingly, though, “transnational export of formats in itself represents an erosion of local particularity” (Bignell, 2005, p. 48-49). This means we ought to recognize not just the erosion of Canadian cultural identity but also the erosion of the particularity of American culture. In Canada, the mobilization of cultural nationalist themes focused on the threat of vulgar foreignness suggests that transnational tends to be viewed in simplistic terms wherein American popular culture equals “bad” and British popular culture equals “good.” As such, despite the fact that “the traveling of reality TV around the world is certainly not evidence for the Americanization of television in the ways that earlier theories of globalization proposed” (Bignell, 2005, p. 59), this is still the perception of reality TV on Canadian television for many Canadians.

This perception is due, in large part, to the way that Canadian culture is often framed as operating in the shadow of American culture and the continued expression of a “strategy of resistance” and “the image of victim . . . [that] is the most logical expression of cultural nationalism on the intellectual scene in Canada” (Rutherford, 1993, pp. 277, 279). This image of the victim is frequently based on the notion that American programming is bad for Canadian viewers and the Canadian industry in general. It does not acknowledge that much of the American TV programming being made in Canada features Canadian cities doubling as U.S. locations or presents culturally indistinct signifiers of nation. One could argue, instead, that Canadians are victims when they accept, unreflectingly, the
ideological position that we must defend against American culture when American and Canadian culture alike are becoming increasingly transnational.

I have argued that cultural nationalism can be seen as the expression of a television-based public. This is not, however, a public to be apprehended by looking for representations of the Canadian people on the CBC’s screens; the public is not constituted by CBC content but rather inspired by it and made real in the discourse surrounding these representations. As individuals and institutions make sense of (transnational) reality television on the CBC, we can see the existence of a cultural nationalist public. The television-based cultural national public is designed to sway public opinion, inspired by transnational content and concerns. While this public predated (reality) television, it became re-focused in the wake of foreign and debased content on the CBC. Following decisions to broadcast reality-style shows, the cultural nationalist public has renewed its ideology even as the CBC, originally tasked with protecting the ideals of cultural nationalism, has retooled its mission to the extent that it has been accused of turning its back on Canadian culture.

The CBC’s move toward transnational reality programming might represent a proactive acknowledgment of the changing nature of Canadian citizenship. As Dissanayake (2006, p. 43) suggests, “[T]he globalizing of cultures has resulted in the creation of newer identities. . . . Identities are linked to dislocations and relocations, attachments and detachments, fixities and volatilities.” Discourses about (and by) the CBC provide Canadians with these attachments and volatilities even as the CBC struggles with its vision of how to best reach out to Canadians, knowing that the Canadian public (and any audience they might hope to attract) is never static but constantly changing in response to local, national, and global instabilities.

The ethos of public broadcasting has been maintained in the rhetoric of CBC-TV’s claims-making as it invokes its own renewed notions of Canadian identity. Made manifest in the ideals of “quality culture” and “distinct national culture,” I have termed this rhetorical construction the “CBC effect.” This effect permeates the CBC’s justifications for programming reality television, conditions responses to it, and connects its current programming to its tradition of providing a public service. Whether one agrees with the move toward transnational formats or not, CBC-TV’s exploitation of the factual entertainment format may produce new iterations of the “CBC effect,” and possibly new expressions of Canadian publics and Canadian audiences. New ethnicities, diasporic groups, hybrid and cosmopolitan audiences alike all constitute the shifting terrain of Canadian publics. Canada’s culture (or cultures) is changing, even as the discourse of Canadian nationalism remains relatively static. As the CBC updates its mandate, it is responding to transnational forces, reaching beyond itself and its immediate national context to re-define itself and its national mission. In so doing, both the CBC and the cultural publics that circulate around it help to constitute public identities and national spaces of belonging.

References


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