On the Policy Reflex in Canadian Communication Studies

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ABSTRACT This commentary notes the existence of a “policy reflex” in Canadian communication studies. The author suggests that many scholars engage in issues having to do with policy even if “policy analysis” is not the goal of scholarship. This tendency is in part due to a limited understanding of policy or a tendency among some scholars to see their work as “critical” over other possible characterizations. In many cases a turn to policy has a symbolic function, marking absence rather than presence. In a research field characterized by major gaps in research and in the face of convoluted or missing data, what we call “policy analysis” often emerges largely by default. The article discusses consequences of this reflex on policy scholarship and public discourses of culture.

KEYWORDS Communication policy; Canada; Methodological approaches Communication studies

RÉSUMÉ Ce commentaire note l’existence d’un certain « réflexe politique » dans les études en communication au Canada. En effet, l’auteur observe que plusieurs savants traitent de politiques presque malgré eux, dans des circonstances où « l’analyse de politiques » n’est pas le but de leurs recherches. On peut attribuer cette tendance à une compréhension limitée des politiques ou encore à la tentation parmi certains savants de percevoir leurs recherches comme étant « critiques » plutôt qu’autre chose. Dans plusieurs de ces cas, l’étude de politiques a une fonction symbolique, marquée par l’absence plutôt que la présence. Ainsi, dans un domaine comportant de grandes lacunes et des données confuses ou manquantes, ce qu’on appelle « l’analyse de politiques » survient souvent par défaut. Cet article discute des conséquences de ce réflexe par rapport à la recherche en politiques et aux discours publics sur la culture.

MOTS CLÉS Politique en communication; Canada; Approches méthodologiques; Études en communication

In Canada the study of communication and the study of policy are often viewed as one and the same. Zoë Druick’s (2007) claim that cultural policy and documentary film are “two realms of cultural output in which Canada has been unsurpassed as a producer” (p. 1) is an apt observation. It reveals the extent to which discussion of a form of communication and the policies that have helped to create the conditions for its existence often appear intertwined. While Druick’s statement discusses
the relationship between cultural form and cultural policy, the same could certainly be true for those working in a range of other fields, such as in “health communication.” If we readily acknowledge the meshing of the two domains, we appear to be more open to interrogating one side over the other. We know that “communication” is a term that has been difficult to pin down, but one can say that “policy” is a term with equally slippery connotations. As a mode of governing, as a device or strategy, or as the conduct of public affairs, we can see that policy represents more than the study of policy documents. It encompasses sites for the production of knowledge, it represents specific modes of writing, it serves as evidence and, for many, it serves as the object of scholarly inquiry. So, many of us confront policy even if we are not performing “policy work.” It is such a persistent feature of the way scholarship is performed that we rarely give it the slightest second thought. I call this condition the “policy reflex.”

In this article I meditate on the impact of the policy reflex on communication studies in Canada. First I point out the ways in which attention to the policy dimensions of the scholarship trouble the administrative/critical distinction often deployed to differentiate Canadian scholarship as distinctive. Such a position has been used as a means of self-congratulation. Unfortunately, this hides more than it reveals. In a sense, Canadian scholarship can be considered as neither critical nor administrative, but based in policy, a sphere that cuts across the two domains. Second, I suggest that the turn to policy is often a default position, the result of working in a research field with few raw materials, scant archival records, and a slim historical understanding of many fields of knowledge. A turn to policy in many cases represents a scholarly case of making lemonade out of lemons. Third, I suggest that for all of our allegedly abundant work on policy, much of this work appears to exist in a vacuum, not only cut off from the influence of policymakers on the ground, but also cut off from an understanding of the ways that policies are made, a consequence of remarkably tunnel vision on what constitutes “policy studies.” For those who see a kind of policy determinism in the study of communication in Canada, or who see their work acting in the interest of making better policy decisions, the consequences for this policy reflex are serious.

Critical scholarship, federal sponsorship

Among the distinctive elements of English-Canadian communication research outlined by Robert Babe is the field’s critical orientation. Babe (2000) drew upon Dallas Smythe’s concept of critical scholarship, one located within a progressive politics, and which saw “researchable problems” in the field as being those able to “reshape institutions to meet the collective needs of the relevant social community” (Smythe & van Dinh quoted in Babe, 2000, p. 16). Sheryl N. Hamilton (2009) notes that for some of its relative merits, this position can also be seen to articulate a not-too-subtle air of cultural superiority. In contrast to the “administrative” approach we typically associate with the mass communication research undertaken by a small group of scholars in the United States in the 1930s, the English-Canadian tradition is supposedly oriented toward more critical questions about the nature of technology on society. Such questions are frequently considered within highly moralistic terms and through the
deployment of a stark exaggeration of a split between the field's contours (Sterne, 2002). There is also the other dimension, in which scholars provide research and expertise to various governmental efforts that would seem to complicate the rigidity the critical/administrative dichotomy tends to produce.

Then there is the other kind of “government research” most of us are aware of. Researchers from the humanities and social sciences apply for funding support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, an arm’s-length agency of the federal government that administers government policy through its support of specific programs, but which relies almost entirely on the involvement of peer review from academics, who scrutinize applications for funding support. The system has been remarkably charitable to academics, supporting a range of scholarship, including this author’s research. However, its ties to the whims of government policy shifts—especially, but not exclusively in an age of unstable minority governments—have the effect of getting academics to think about the relationship between the state and their work.

I want to re-state here that recognition of this relationship does not signify collusion with the state or necessarily convert scholars into political functionaries. However, it does mean that applicants for funding, whether under the new “Talent,” “Insight,” or “Connection” regimes at SSHRC, or through strategic joint initiatives like the current “Automotive Partnership Canada” or the now-in-vogue Community-University Research Alliances have to be attuned to what the government perceives as the policy orientation such research is intended to generate, even if the actual research undertaken produces different or contradictory results. There are, of course, other aspects of the policy apparatus that have deeper consequences. The rising influence of the Tri-Council guidelines that review how scholars collect, store, and distribute their data using human subjects has turned the practice of research ethics into one bound by legalism rather than by intellectual curiosity. Although not all of us are as up to date on matters of intellectual property as, say, Michael Geist, many become keenly aware of their effect on the research process when the time comes to publish images to accompany our research, or to photocopy or reproduce audiovisual materials.

Policy by default
When the attention turns to research on Canada’s media systems, the tendency has been to see a study of a particular media industry by studying the policies that affect that industry more than the players in the industry itself. Hence we possess extensive book-length histories and anthologies of numerous policy areas—film policy (Dorland, 1996; Magder, 1993; Pendakur, 1990); broadcasting policy (Armstrong, 2010; Collins, 2000; Peers, 1969, 1979; Raboy, 1990); telecommunication policy (Babe, 1990; Collins 1977; Rens, 2001; Winseck, 1998)—plus numerous journal articles and book chapters exploring various individual policy reports or initiatives, along with anthologies devoted to the cultural industries and the communication policies that support them (Dorland, 1996; Raboy & Shtern, 2010; Shade & Moll, 2004, 2008). In addition, there exists a voluminous literature associated with the history and output of public institutions, such as the CBC and the National Film Board of Canada, themselves located within discourses of policy.
Finally there is the analysis of specific policy documents. This is particularly true for the genre of studies that explores the Royal Commissions that supposedly charted out the future direction of media technologies, such as radio, television, or the Internet. Arguably the best example is the ink spilled on the Massey Commission report of 1951, which provided the basis for state support of the arts and cultural industries—and did so in a language shot through with Arnoldian notions of high culture, anti-Americanism, latent magic bullet theories of media effects, and blatant cultural nationalism. Massey occupies a powerful place in the literature, with its own scholarly monograph (Litt, 1992), or as a pivot point in Canada’s cultural development (Edwardson, 2008; Tippett, 1990). A testament to the power of Massey Commission report—and to the power of a policy reflex in the critical imagination—is its appearance alongside other policy documents in the appendix of the recently published Canadian cultural studies reader. The editors acknowledge that the analysis (treatment) of government documents “has drawn sustained analysis far beyond what one finds” in other sites where cultural studies flourishes, such as in the United States or the United Kingdom (Mookerjea, Szeman, & Farschou, 2009, p. 517).

If policymaking is not the overt purpose of much “sustained analysis” on communication, then it often comes through the back door. As mentioned earlier, it is very common for scholars to see the need to make policy recommendations in the conclusions of scholarly monographs. For example, Serra Tinic’s (2005) incisive ethnographic study of production cultures in Vancouver ends with an awkward set of recommendations aimed at a “restructuring of the industry in a manner that reconciles the national broadcasting mandate with its initial goals of interregional communication” (p. 158). Bart Beaty and Rebecca Sullivan’s (2006) study of contemporary Canadian television contains numerous analyses of television programs; it plainly acknowledges that the study of Canadian television often results in studies of Canadian television policy (a point also made—and addressed—in Druick & Kotsopoulos, 2008). However, the authors repeat the policy narrative by arguing that “the path of Canadian television can be marked by six major federal reports” (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006, p. 29) and further pepper their otherwise valuable account with suggestions on how the government should act to “enable social and cultural difference” to better reflect “those values that have long been held to be the defining features of this nation” (Beaty & Sullivan, 2006, pp. 140, 144). In these cases the tendency is the same: to default to a study of culture in terms that can be converted toward its policy implications is to provide a roadmap that would lead to amelioration, toward a distinctly Canadian medium. Such a default position then has the effect of converting conclusions of a scholarly study into recommendations for policy use, whether that is the intention or not.

Why is this the case? In some instances it may have to do with the fact that the scholars share some of the nationalist orientations of the policies or policymakers. “Cultural nationalism desires a space in which culture cannot be so easily reduced to its contemporary commodity status,” writes Imre Szeman (2000, p. 225). Placing television within that “space” is accomplished through a denial of any additional roles it may play within Canadian life that do not directly contribute to a nationalist objective. The tendency toward policy recommendations may attest to the power of the critical
ethos or to the pressure placed on scholars to produce work that is applicable to the policy process. In still others the drive to protect the system, or make it better, comes from a good place. It acts as a show of support, a boost to some aspect of Canada's struggling artistic sector.

But the policy recommendation articulated out of the context of a policy process also represents a very specific way of communicating, a mode of argumentation that can offer a prescription with few serious consequences. How can one argue with a suggestion to fix something in the future if there is nothing against which to argue? This is all the more reason if, as Abramson, Shtern, and Taylor (2008) suggest, media companies in Canada pay little heed to the output of communication scholars. One might argue that such indifference may render the recommendations of a book or article's conclusion moot. At the same time it also reminds us that an administrative tradition may not have taken place in Canada even if that was the desired result.

Raw materials
For my purposes, though, there is another dimension. The policy reflex also operates at a symbolic level, as a marker of absence as much as presence. Where to begin? For starters there remain those gaps in the historical literature. In spite of advances to address the early history of radio, or public broadcasting in Canada, we remain without extensive scholarly histories of vast stretches of media activity in English-speaking Canada. This includes academic studies of private television since the mid-1960s (especially cable and pay television), the post-war history of Canadian radio, or moments of technological change like the invention of FM radio, the rise of pay television, or the domestication of the computer, for example. While it is common to assume that studies of the CBC are more abundant than those of other cultural actors and that work on specific genres of CBC programming, like drama (Miller, 1987, 1996, 2008), are more ubiquitous than others, an institutional or cultural history or ethnographic study of the network, like Georgina Born's (2004) participant observation of the BBC, remains to be written. Studies of the audience remain located in highly abstract and moralistic terms. The audience in Canada usually appears in two guises: as wayward vessels in need of programming connecting them to people in the rest of the country, or as addicts to American programming calling on the state to help re-direct its behaviour to something more productive (Attallah, 2007).

As many are aware this is a partial list, one that cannot capture the absences in the history of the newspaper (Allen, 2006; Gabriele & Moore, 2009), sound recording, magazine, or book publishing industries, either for mainstream or alternative audiences. Nor can it account for the attempts by some to chip away at the edges through the study of things like cinema-going (Moore, 2008), or of the circulation of cultural works within Canada (Straw, 2005). Developments such as recent work on the early history of radio (“Remembering Radio”), the formation of a media and communication history committee within the Canadian Historical Association, and the publication of a media history reader (Allen & Robinson, 2009) are steps in the right direction, primarily because they acknowledge all that remains to be analyzed. They also remind us, though, of all that has been done in their absence, most notably the implementation of policies that have structured Canada's cultural industries for decades.
Most ironic of all is that we have only scant histories of the agencies that produce many of the policies we tend to analyze. An institutional history of the Board of Broadcast Governors exists (Stewart & Hull, 1994); a history of the CRTC does not. Furthermore, we lack academic histories of the Canada Council or analyses of various government departments we associate with the administration of the cultural realm, such as the Department of Communications, the Department of Canadian Heritage, Industry Canada, or the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Although the field is well represented by analysis of policy documents, it is less well-informed on the histories and social and institutional developments that accompanied technological change in Canada, and the policies that went along with it.

Then there is the problem of data. To undertake work on Canada or the cultural, communication, or telecommunication industries is to turn to the state for the evidence. The country’s historical record is kept largely, albeit not exclusively, at the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa. In addition, most statistical data—including most industrial data—is kept and collected by Statistics Canada. However, confidentiality rules means that industrial statistics are collected in aggregate; it is virtually impossible to disentangle figures for an analysis of specific media companies or organizations. We also rarely teach students on the mechanics of data: how to read the numbers and where to go to find more of them. For those unwilling, unable, or lacking in time to pester government agencies with questions or to search elsewhere for other data (see Acland, 2005; Winseck, 2010), the policy document emerges as evidence almost by default, the only thing able to be analyzed in a world of absent data.

Then there are the archival holdings, sparse in the best of cases, non-existent in the rest. Unlike countries like the United States or Britain or Germany or France or Holland, a formal archive of Canada’s film and television output remains a pipe dream, up there with a well-financed and extensive train system. A visit to the website of the AV Trust and its collection of “Masterworks” is a sobering experience and a sad commentary on the state of the country’s archives. Thank goodness for YouTube! This archival absence complicates the process of undertaking research on the history of Canada’s televisual heritage. In a broader sense, it also contributes to the popular notion of Canada’s cultural output as marginal, another popular theme that operates more profitably at the practical level (marginal access to materials) than at the cultural one (a culture “on the margins”). Historical research on Canadian cultural institutions, such as the National Film Board of Canada or the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation or many of the government departments that oversee them, is often subject to various access restrictions. Indeed, many documents associated with the Cold War era are subject to restrictions and much redacting (see Kristmanson, 2003). Some private collections—including the papers of prominent politicians or political functionaries—are subject to restrictions and review by the families or foundations that donated them. Acquiring access to such material is a long and laborious task, and places the researcher face to face with Access to Information laws, which can often take months to process. As Michael Dorland (1998) once put it, such obstacles, then, “pit scholarly knowledge against forms of state power” (p. 29).
What we do not count

The costs of all of this are serious. For one, few of us understand the social or cultural dimensions of policymaking. By this I mean that few researchers understand the processes by which policies are made or the vast networks of people who make them. The tendency to shy away from ethnographic studies (due, I am sure, to the difficulties of gaining access to key sources) means that while we may be aware of rules and processes for policymaking, we fail to acknowledge what many already know: that lots of policies are made off-line. Attending public hearings one sees the subtle pas de deux of policy unfold up close. When the music chimes in and the screen gets foggy on those CPAC broadcasts of CRTC hearings is when the show really starts. Here those standing as adversaries on television—the Commissioners and representatives from the networks or phone companies—meet in the middle of the floor, shaking hands and kibitzing before breaking for lunch. One might argue it is here where the policy is made, while we are busily setting about examining the transcripts posted on the CRTC’s website.

What about the other players on the field? For example, most broadcasters or media companies have government relations departments, where the back-and-forth of policymaking procedure and paperwork takes place. However, as scholars we retain an almost auteurist tendency in our analysis, one which sees the presidents of companies, like the Shaws or the Péladeaus or the Aspers, as the leading forces for change. In very different contexts, people like Ben Kafka (2009) or Cornelia Vismann (2008) have explored the power of paperwork in the materiality of communication. The efforts of clerks, lawyers, paralegals, and secretaries are very much part of “government relations.” Indeed, these people live in the shadows of our scholarly purview. We know even less about the career movement in the regulatory field, the cultures of regulatory environments, the interpersonal dynamics of relations between commissioners or policy officials, how people are socialized into these environments, what books they read, and so on. Any of the forms of knowledge we might normally demand of other accounts of social life continue to exist in our imagination or within the closed world of policymaking.

The same is true for the organizations closely associated with the policy process. We know so little about the history or material function of groups like the Canadian Conference for the Arts, or the imperilled Canadian Association of Broadcasters, or SOCAN, or the Writers’ Union of Canada, all which have an impact on the shape or direction of specific policies. Then there are the number of law firms that work for the networks, or consulting firms, from Groupe Secor to the Nordicity Group, that receive exclusive contacts to provide knowledge to the government or lobby groups, which influence the direction of policy decisions. An appreciation of such actors occurs only intermittently, usually coinciding with book publications (Armstrong, 2010; Audley, 1983; Grant & Wood, 2004). We also rarely subject the data coming from those involved in the process to much critical scrutiny. Charles Acland has noted how one figure, that Canadian films occupy 2% of “screen time,” both mixes together two ideas (screen time and screen space) indiscriminately but also derives from a policy study done in the early 1990s (Acland, 2002). The public use and misuse of numbers within
the discourses of culture is something in dire need of scrutiny. We should be the ones who scrutinize them.

This is beyond what little we know about how cultural careers are made in Canada. How does one become an actor or director or visual artist or cinematographer? How do these cultural workers carve out a career in the industry, negotiating between their creative endeavours and the labyrinthine bureaucracies that either keep them in business or add to the frustrations that already cloud the creative process? We do gain some insights, such as that scholarship which explores how program producers have to negotiate pressures from a range of different agents to change content for American audiences or organizations like the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council (see Heuman, in press; Levine, 2009; Tinic, 2009). However, we tend not to ask the question, as Hans Abbing (2004) does, about why artists may be poor. This kind of question would draw our attention to the coping strategies and career moves that those in creative fields struggle with as part of what he calls “the exceptional economy of the arts.”

The goal here would not necessarily be to produce a form of scholarship that is better equipped to serve the process, although one could agree with Abramson, Shtern, and Taylor (2008) this would be a noble venture toward “more and better research.” It would also help to produce different research that sees spheres of policymaking as sites for the study of a range of intellectual questions about the production of knowledge or the cultural study of policymaking, to point out just two. As Jonathan Sterne (2002) noted, “[O]ne can attend to the mechanisms of power and still wind up mystifying the field of differential relations produced by these mechanisms” (p. 73). The disconnect, then, between the amount of policy analysis and the amount that we appear not to know should give anyone who has produced such reports for the policy process—including this author—considerable cause for concern.

Hints of the kinds of things this type of analysis could yield come at points where the researcher is diligent, or where state secrecy bumps up against the exigencies of the audit society. Two recent examples are worth noting here. An article published by the CBC documents the existence of an Executive Interchange program, which brings people from the private sector and academia to work for government. In one case, a senior official from Telus, who once lobbied the CRTC on behalf of the company, went to work for the regulator before leaving to join Telesat, where he now lobbies the people he once “interchanged” with (Ireton, 2010). Recent policies forcing key government officials to make public their hospitality and travel expenses (spun as “proactive disclosure”) provide a glimpse into how policymaking takes place one lunch at a time. Consider the following claim by the chairman of the CRTC, Konrad von Finckenstein, for a $12.45 breakfast meeting with a Telus official on February 9, 2010, “to discuss broadcasting issues” at the Café Cognac, located steps from the regulator’s offices (see image on next page).

The juxtaposition of these accounts is not to suggest that the two matters are related. Sadly, we cannot know exactly what was discussed over coffee in Gatineau. That said, though, the question of how one finds a job, or where people work after their time at the regulator, or where those people in the regulatory field eat—and with
whom—begins to point us in the direction of the day-to-day life of the policymaking game, a life largely absent from the scholarship.

To a degree, the second consequence is more serious. In the absence of primary data, cultural matters can easily be subjected to political manipulation. Since no one really has the facts and since even fewer of us understand the social dynamics under which policymaking takes place, matters of culture—like the amount of drama on television, the relationship between content regulations and industrial survival, and so on—can easily assume a public life in the political domain. Those who spit out numbers and diagnostics of the “system” can do so with impunity, fully mindful that there appears to be no real forum for refuting such claims with empirical evidence, and that those who do can easily be tarnished as pro-American, as tacit supporters of corporate monoculture, or as enemies of the arts.

The policy reflex, then, lends itself to a political discourse of the cultural dimensions of communication in Canadian life. Let me try and put it a different way. The reflex lends itself to the kind of determinism that we would find problematic when applied to technology or to the economy, but which appears acceptable when attached to policy. Free of an appreciation of the anthropology of policy (Shore & Wright, 1997) or of the rigorous analysis of industrial data, the conclusions this kind of policy analysis often produce can leave us wanting. More that this, though, such an approach is regressive, in that it works against the kinds of questions academics are best equipped to answer. It draws us into discussions where media consumption is an expression of national identity or where the success or failure of a given piece of culture reflects the essence of Canadian-ness or the efforts of bureaucrats to structure it into existence. Anyone who has tried to bring a film or book or magazine or television show to market could only wish things were that easy.

We have seen how these issues materialize on the ground. Consolidation moves apace, bands or movies with obscene names find themselves the targets of government fury, artists depict politicians as malevolent dictators, and cable companies and networks (often owned by the same companies) hit the air and the web fomenting jingoism in the name of stopping a “TV tax” on one side or saving “local TV” on the
other (Wagman, 2010). That’s to say nothing of the “Fox News North” debacle, which unfolded in the pages of the Sun newspaper chain, in the offices of the non-profit group Avaaz, and on Margaret Atwood’s Twitter stream. From these experiences we see how effortlessly Canadian politesse yields to a most uncivil discourse when talking about culture. This is when we invoke fear of “foreign ownership” or talk about how consumption of American culture will wither away “our values” or expose broadcasters for the amount they spend on television programming from “Hollywood” when they should be spending on “our stories.” Do we really want to go there when there is so little “there”?

It may be true that a policy reflex is a part of the Canadian way to approach problems of communication that is critical in nature. Given the issues I have sketched out here, and the consequences of them, it is also the case that a tilt toward policy reveals more about what is not said than what is: that there is a gulf between the knowledge used to make media Canadian and that which is available to scholars to make sense of it. This reflex, then, is often the result of a state of malaise Canadian academics and their students feel working in a research terrain with so many potholes. This reality confronts communications scholars in important ways, often leaving policy analysis as the only thing left to say instead of saying nothing at all.

Notes
1. The credit for the term “policy reflex” goes to Kim Sawchuk. That said, I have developed it in my own way here. I thank her for her generosity and for her encouragement to develop this piece. The article was originally presented at the European Communication Research and Education Association conference in Hamburg, Germany, on October 15, 2010. I would also like to thank Marc Furstenau, Michael Dorland, and Sheryl Hamilton for their helpful suggestions. The responsibility for the final result rests with me.

2. Thanks should also be directed to the National Film Board of Canada, which has taken full advantage of the possibilities of digital distribution in putting a large number of films online, both on its website and through applications that allow you to stream films on computers and iPods.

Websites
Remembering Radio project. [http://amaclenn.apps01.yorku.ca/radio]
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