Review Essay

The Canadian Broadcasting Policy Tradition: Learning from the Past, Building for the Future

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Broadcasting has played an integral role in Canadian society for some 100 years. Early private operators have existed since the early twentieth century and, since the Canadian National Railways’ initiation of broadcasting services for passengers in 1924, communication technologies such as radio and television have been perceived as a means of fostering Canadian collective identity and protecting the sovereignty of the Canadian nation-state. This rhetoric of “technological nationalism” (Charland, 1986) and subsequent attempts to balance public and private broadcasters’ concerns mean that broadcasting policy in Canada is situated in a privileged socio-economic position.

Surveying 10 decades of often-contested government policy formulation is no small task. With Broadcasting Policy in Canada, Robert Armstrong (president of Communications Médias Inc. and previously a lecturer in the Department of Communication Studies, Concordia University) distills the historic trends of Canadian broadcasting policy as well as the contemporary realities and future issue areas into an accessible and comprehensive text. Broadcasting Policy in Canada is a largely descriptive book that presents historic and contemporary policy trajectory in a straightforward manner ideally suited for students, scholars, and practitioners seeking a primer on Canada’s broadcasting policy framework and is well-suited for introductory courses on the topic.

Armstrong’s historical breadth and presentation style are useful for gaining a broad understanding of Canada’s broadcasting policy tradition. Following an introductory chapter that helpfully lays out the key terms and technical specifics of broadcasting, Armstrong moves into a discussion of the historic evolution of Canadian broadcasting policy. With the Aird Commission (1928), the technical and economic
nature of early radio-telecommunications policy become supplemented by cultural and social policy concerns, foregrounding public policy issues that continue to undergird Canadian broadcasting policy. Broadcasting Policy in Canada presents these issue areas in a comprehensive and balanced manner, demonstrating the dual role of regulators and policymakers to ensure that a vibrant broadcasting sector remains both economically viable and culturally attuned to the Canadian public.

The author’s presentation of Canada’s public broadcasting tradition—including the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and its predecessor, as well as provincial public broadcasters—and the role of the country’s radio and telecommunications regulator, now named the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), demonstrates their respective evolutions and contemporary realities. Broadcasting Policy in Canada is a comprehensive survey of the Canadian broadcasting sector, meaning that an in-depth treatment of the issues covered by the book falls outside of the scope of this short review essay. The book, however, traverses a broad spectrum of key issue areas involved in the historic and contemporary realities of regulating and creating policy for the Canadian broadcasting sector.

Alongside the historic development of Canadian broadcasting policy and the ongoing development of both the CRTC and the CBC, Armstrong presents necessary overviews of key issues, including the following: Canadian Content requirements, public broadcasting writ large, financing mechanisms for broadcasters and content producers, social issues addressed through the CRTC, broadcasting distribution regulations, changing distribution carriage arrangements, and the Canadian ownership as well as competition policy implications related to horizontal and vertical integration in the broadcasting sector. Two often-overlooked issues are also well presented. In the future, copyright as well as other intellectual property concerns and the domestic broadcasting implications of globalization and international trade agreements will play increasingly important roles in the development of Canadian broadcasting policy. Broadcasting Policy in Canada presents brief overviews of these topics that help foreground these issues, however, Armstrong’s treatment of these areas would benefit from an increased amount of attention to socio-legal issues. For the most part—save for analysis and criticism of political and financial influences over policymaking—Armstrong’s treatment is narrowly focused to providing description from primarily legal and policy-oriented perspectives.

This focus works well for this broad overview of Canadian broadcasting policy and is an instructive introduction to the various issues at play. As is evident in his conclusion, Armstrong’s description of Canadian broadcasting policy is underlined with a forward-looking perspective that helps orient the discussion toward the future. By presenting the history of Canadian broadcasting policy in a comprehensive and far-reaching manner, the book’s greatest strength is found in the number of questions that it raises for current and future policymaking deliberations. Issues such as corporate concentration in the broadcasting industry and ensuing ramifications for diversity of opinions and voices, regulatory “capture” of the CRTC, the role of public broadcasting and the CBC, local and community-based offerings, the bilingual and multiracial/multicultural composition of Canadian society, financing of Canadian content and tradi-
tional broadcasting, including the CBC, as well as fee-for-carriage issues and the emergence of digital and “new” media distribution platforms are among the issues raised but not answered. In the two years since this book’s publication, these issues are now squarely at the forefront of Canadian broadcasting policy deliberations.

That neither the CRTC nor the Canadian government have yet to address these issues in a comprehensive manner, instead treating them in an ad hoc fashion, ensures that *Broadcasting Policy in Canada* remains an instructive and useful contribution to academic and policymaking circles. Changing technological and economic realities are throwing Canada’s broadcasting policy community into flux. Current global macro-economic forces are straining domestic budgets, leading to austerity programs that are reducing funding for public services, including the CBC. Corporate consolidation and vertical integration of large communications and broadcasting entities have been undertaken—and ultimately approved by the CRTC—presumably as a response to media convergence facilitated by digital technologies. Until the October 2012 rejection of BCE’s takeover attempt of Astral Media, the CRTC’s hands-off approach to the mergers of large communications and broadcasting corporations has led many to question the role and effectiveness of the CRTC in fulfilling its social and economic mandates (see, for example, Ranger, 2012). At the same time, the CRTC’s reluctance to regulate emerging digital media content and its distributors is causing many to question the future viability of Canadian broadcasting in an increasingly global and digital world.

These are not minor issues and will require informed policy discussions and formulation. As *Broadcasting Policy in Canada* demonstrates, the history of Canadian broadcasting policy has been attentive to both public and private concerns. The future of content distribution appears increasingly digital; this evolution will challenge existing institutions and regulations. Moving forward, and hopefully in the Government of Canada’s long-awaited Canadian Digital Economy strategy, recalling the lessons of a century of broadcasting policy will be essential. The CBC has been a leader adapting to this changing technological environment, integrating digital content and considerations into its offerings. If only to assure its own survival, the CRTC will need to address the emerging opportunities and challenges associated with digital media and incorporate them into its regulatory frameworks. *Broadcasting Policy in Canada* reminds the reader that such transformations have occurred previously and that engraining Canada’s broadcasting policy tradition in a digital ecosystem will help preserve evolving cultural policy concerns relating to Canadian collective identity and sovereignty.

**References**
