

## Research in Brief

# “It Won’t Go Viral”: Documenting the Charter of Québec Values and Talking Theory on YouTube

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**ABSTRACT** *This Research in Brief reflects upon how postsecondary resources were used to create a feminist, free, online, and pedagogical documentary about the Charter of Québec Values in 2013–2014, to intervene in the mediated story of the legislation and to influence public policy. The authors discuss the scholarly context that influenced their documentary-making approach, as well as their process as first-time producers, and argue for the use of online tools to insert communication studies into a field of debate. They conclude by offering three recommendations for those who wish to undertake similar public projects from within the academy, focused on evaluating storytelling models, pursuing funding, and engaging members of the broader community.*

**KEYWORDS** *Charter of Québec Values; Participatory video-making; Multiculturalism; Policy*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Cet article se penche sur l'utilisation de ressources postsecondaires dans la production d'un documentaire pédagogique féministe disponible en ligne gratuitement portant sur la Charte des valeurs québécoises de 2013-2014, documentaire qui avait comme objectif d'intervenir dans le débat médiatique et d'avoir un impact sur les politiques gouvernementales. Les auteures abordent le contexte académique dans lequel leur démarche prend racine ainsi que la manière dont elles ont perçu leur première expérience de production, et plaident en faveur de l'utilisation des outils en ligne afin de permettre aux théories de la communication de s'immiscer dans le débat public. Elles concluent en partageant leurs recommandation aux universitaires qui souhaiteraient initier un projet similaire, en mettant l'accent sur l'analyse des modèles narratifs, sur la recherche de financement, ainsi que sur l'importance d'impliquer les membres de la communauté dans son ensemble.*

**MOTS CLÉS:** *Charte des valeurs québécoises; Réalisation vidéo participative; Multiculturalisme; Politique*

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## Introduction

This research in brief explores the challenges and promises of mobilizing postsecondary resources—specifically, the diverse knowledge, critical observations, and research taking place within our institutions—to make a free online pedagogical documentary about an ongoing political issue. Our documentary, *Tout Cela Est... : Communicating the Charter of Québec Values/Communiquer la Charte des valeurs québécoises* (Esseghaier, Audette-Longo, & Lefebvre, 2014), advances and shares the tools that communication studies offer for people to critically engage with problems of mediatized stereotypes, cross-cultural misunderstandings, and anecdotes regarding the impacts of non-Christian religions on Québec society. Produced in 2013 and 2014, this project was a response to Pauline Marois' Parti Québécois government announcement, in September of 2013, of plans to legislate guidelines to safeguard the “values of State secularism and religious neutrality and of equality between women and men” (Québec, 2013).<sup>1</sup> These guidelines included prohibiting public sector employees in Québec from wearing ostentatious religious symbols while they were at work. Marois and then democratic institutions minister Bernard Drainville argued that the Charter would provide clear rules to help public institutions and publicly funded businesses navigate such requests. The proposed Charter sparked widespread debate within Québec and throughout Canada. In media coverage, the debate often pivoted on questions of women's rights, with the spectre of the hijab, the niqab, and the burqa at the fore. As mediatized discussions turned to Muslim women's rights and roles in Québec public life, women's centres across the province reported increased “intolerance, racism and violence” aimed at Muslim women (CBC News, 2013).

To intervene in this debate, we—then three doctoral students in the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University—undertook a feminist, bilingual, Web-based documentary project to interrogate both the Charter of Québec Values and the media discourses through which it was defined. Eschewing a traditional journalistic style, we adopted a scholarly but accessible approach to the provincial and national discussion. *Tout Cela Est...* turns the camera onto faculty and students in our department, engaging in lengthy on-campus interviews focused on critiquing the Charter, how it was presented to the public, and how it was covered by media. These interviews are edited together to investigate emergent questions of representation, gender, race, and Québec secularism (or *laïcité*). While cut together with footage from life in Montréal and computer screen shots taken at the time of the Charter's release, the final product is comparable in form to educational documentaries featuring in-depth interviews with scholars.<sup>2</sup> *Tout Cela Est...* is posted online, through YouTube and a Wordpress blog, in two formats: viewers can watch it as a whole in the form of a nearly hour-long video, or watch any of five sections separately.<sup>3</sup> Each section features professors and students who cite relevant academic literature and articulate arguments related to the impacts of the Charter. For example, in one section, Associate Professor Matt Soar discusses how images of “acceptable” and “unacceptable” signs were presented on the government's website promoting the proposed legislation. In another, Professor Yasmin Jiwani discusses how colonialist discourses were incorporated into the public debate, which serve to highlight

the ways in which Québec, or the West, was portrayed as civilized while Islam, or the East, was portrayed as backward.

Later, during a public screening in our department, one viewer warned us that the documentary could not “go viral” given the absence of interviews with people on the street, which may have included ardent supporters of the Charter, as well as the absence of a more professional aesthetic. Though we aimed to influence public policy, going viral was not the purpose of the documentary; rather, in drawing upon our academic community, we wanted to begin circulating concepts in the public sphere that are normally relegated to university classrooms.

This research in brief aims to outline the challenges of producing the documentary with no budget and no experience, and to further advocate drawing upon—and making public—scholarly expertise to respond quickly to emergent social and political issues. In reflecting upon our experiences, we acknowledge and evaluate how issues of institutional power structures can arise in a production process dedicated to intervening in an ongoing political debate. In the following section, we briefly discuss the debates and context that influenced our approach, then outline our process of developing and showing the documentary. We close with three recommendations for those who wish to undertake similar public projects from within the academy: evaluate how to tell your story; investigate available resources; and engage stakeholders throughout the life of the project.

### Literature review

The Charter of Québec Values did not solely target the hijab; restricting public service workers from wearing religious symbols also included banning “headgear, clothing, jewelry or other adornments which, by their conspicuous nature, overtly indicate a religious affiliation” (Québec, 2013). Nonetheless, the legislation borrowed discourses that have long circulated about Othered people, specifically Muslim women.

Early in the Charter debate, a group of 20 prominent Québec feminists, calling themselves “les Janette,” for writer and celebrity Janette Bertrand, issued an open letter supporting the Charter for its dedication to equality, before rallying in the streets to support the proposed legislation. Some co-writers of the letter, all of whom included “Janette” as a middle name when signing the statement, were recognizable figures in Québec’s arts or intellectual communities. Many identified as being born in Québec, and three identified as “being from countries associated with Islam” such as Lebanon, Morocco, or Tunisia (Melançon, 2015–2016, pp. 52–53; see also Bertrand, Farhoud, Poupart, et al., 2013). The letter,

... recall[ed] the struggle for equality between men and women. It then affirm[ed] that freedom of religion is threatening this equality. ... The letter then associate[d] the Charter with the right to vote acquired by women, which allowed them to free themselves from the domination of the clergy and of the government. Non-Christian, or at least non-Catholic religions would thus be a third force of domination. (Melançon, 2015–2016, p. 52).

Unpacking the statement in an interview for *Tout Cela Est...*, Associate Professor Krista Geneviève Lynes argues in the film that such a defence of the Charter created a

discourse of a need to save Muslim women from themselves and their culture, citing Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) criticism that brown women are constructed as needing to be saved from brown men by white men (p. 305). This rescue narrative is common in relation to Muslim women; for example, to justify the war in Afghanistan, Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) argues that the United States employed a discourse of saving Afghan women. She argues that this narrative relies "on and reinforce[s] a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged" (p. 789). The Charter of Québec Values was held out as progressive; some Muslim women's rejection of it and their objection to removing their hijabs while at work served to support constructions of Muslim women as oppressed, brainwashed, and backward, which in turn framed non-intersectional feminism from the West as the only legitimate feminism.

The Charter of Québec Values can also be understood as part of renewed emphasis upon state secularism in the province. In 2007, Jean Charest's Liberal government appointed a provincial commission, chaired by Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor (2008), to better understand "public discontent concerning reasonable accommodation" and ultimately to "formulate recommendations to the government to ensure that accommodation practices conform to Québec's values as a pluralistic, democratic, egalitarian society" (p. 17). Reviewing newspaper coverage of the Bouchard-Taylor commission, Monika Kin Gagnon and Yasmin Jiwani (2012) argue that media representations compounded justifications for "reasonable accommodation" by failing to challenge the terms of the debate, and by fixating on Muslim women's head or face coverings. Gagnon and Jiwani (2012) argue coverage of the hearings "conflate[d] democracy with populism" (p. 130) by, for example, giving equal weight to "both racist and antiracist statements" (p. 136). In their reading of Québec's major French and English newspapers, the authors Gagnon and Jiwani (2012) also find that the media "confuse[d] cultural and religious symbols and affiliations" (p. 131). Essentially, news coverage focused on publicly aired perceptions of religious and cultural differences between so-called "Québec" culture and "Other" cultures. In their piece, Gagnon and Jiwani (2012) note that, while the bulk of coverage was pointed at Muslim and Hasidic Jewish communities as "prototypically deviant and nonconforming immigrants" (p. 143), the messiness of difference-defining in the name of determining reasonable accommodations drew in generalizations about a number of other (non-Christian or non-white) communities as well, including, for example, Indigenous peoples. In 2006 and 2007, leading up to and coinciding with the commission's consultations, rumours and misunderstandings about different religions in Québec—and supposed threats to traditional Québec culture—were reported in the media "as-is," Gagnon argues in our documentary, or without question, clarification, or substantiation of facts. In her interview, Gagnon says this ultimately, "sanctioned a racist discourse to circulate in the public sphere repeatedly and ... even more insidiously, it allowed for a range of type of anxieties that were not only racist but xenophobic, also sexist, to kind of congeal together and be conflated."

### **Developing *Tout Cela Est...***

In late 2013 and early 2014, our goal was to challenge such representations as they reappeared in the context of the Charter of Québec Values. By interviewing academics and students housed within our Department of Communication at Concordia University,

we worked to trouble mediated anecdotes and misperceptions. For the purposes of our project, we defined media broadly to include daily stories in mainstream news venues as well as government mailouts, websites, and subway advertisements.<sup>4</sup> Because we intended for the finished videos to be available to a broad public before the Charter could become law, we depended upon the deadline-oriented participation of both on-screen interviewees and behind-the-scenes volunteers.

Our approach was feminist and collaborative; our roles and responsibilities as co-producers were flexible, as was our approach to interviewing. In her meditation on feminist film-making, Kay Armatage (1979) suggests there should be as little distance as possible between “subject and crew” (p. 49). This notion resonates with principles of participatory video-making, which are marked by dialogical processes of shooting and editing that allow for revision alongside the wishes and goals of those being filmed (Kendon, 2003, p. 143). This process does not, however, erase a range of power differentials that were at play in filming *Tout Cela Est...*. Whereas a documentary oriented toward public consumption can lend more power to producers than subjects, a university, as an institution, is structured around a hierarchy in which tenured faculty potentially have more power or influence than doctoral students. Feminist making and researching practice demand attention to these power inequities, working through them transparently, without denying their presence (see Doucet & Mauthner, 2006, pp. 40–41).

Part of our feminist and participatory approach to production included sharing the edited videos with all participants prior to making the documentary public. While our goal was for the final product to be accessible and journalistic in style, this sharing, and asking participants for their feedback, was a departure from most standard journalistic practices. When we received suggestions or comments from participants, we discussed them among ourselves, considering them alongside our own goals. As a team, we were aware of different relationships to participants; some of whom might be our academic committee members, for example. In some ways, this uneven power dynamic would appear to present a unique challenge given our positions and the positions of those we interviewed. However, tensions around relative power and maintaining relationships between interviewers and interviewees can always be a challenge when undertaking public scholarship. Part of asking people to share their ideas or stories in a public forum that you ultimately determine requires asking them to trust you, and then honouring that trust in a transparent fashion. Sometimes we made changes according to the comments we received; other times, we returned to the participants to discuss why we were not following their recommendation with the intention of better explaining our position and hopefully better understanding theirs.

We began filming interviews on-campus with a handheld video camera in October 2013, with no working budget and a timeline tied to the proposed legislation’s movement through Québec’s National Assembly. Interviewees were recruited via email from within our department, as we wanted to foster in-depth analyses of the Charter from a communication studies perspective and to turn around a final video in fairly short order. We asked participants to consider specific aspects of the issue they wanted to discuss on-camera, and to speak in English or French according to their own comfort level. By the time the interviews were completed in November, we had hours of raw

footage and four key themes: the communication strategies, signs, and symbols of the Charter; mediated debates over gender equality; representations of race and ethnicity; and representations of Québec secularism. New to the video editing process, we used software and websites that were available for free and fair use online, or were already installed on our own computers. Secondary footage included material filmed by Mariam Esseghaier during Montréal protests of the Charter, illustrative shots of the city and media sources, and open-source images found on the internet. A fairly complete draft of the final documentary, with translated subtitles,<sup>5</sup> was distributed among participants in late January 2014 for their approval and input, as discussed above.

Prior to posting the completed video online, we held two public screenings and discussions, first for an event organized by the Muslim Social Research Forum at Concordia University in February, then for our department in March. We also applied to the provincial government to present parts of the documentary during public hearings regarding the Charter. Ours was among approximately 250 applications (see Bitonti, 2014), and we were not contacted or invited to present during the hearings that were scheduled for January, February, or March 2014. When a provincial election was called for April, the Charter hearings ceased. We posted *Tout Cela Est...* online in March 2014. According to YouTube statistics, at the time of writing, the complete documentary has been viewed approximately 100 times, the introductory video nearly 200 times, and each of the five separately posted segments have received between 50 and 100 views.

Following the two screenings in Montréal, and a third in St. Catharines, Ontario, at the May 2014 meeting of the Canadian Communication Association, we provided audience members with anonymous feedback forms to gauge how they viewed the documentary. On the form and as part of our presentation, we noted the feedback would remain anonymous, but we hoped to use elements on our website or in future publications. The feedback we received could be loosely grouped into two categories: support for an alternative way of discussing the Charter of Québec Values; and concern the documentary was too academic, too situated in an English-language university, and too focused away from pro-Charter positions. Some argued, in writing and in discussions we undertook after each screening, that the absence of views from people on the street or from other professionals, such as lawyers, social workers, or teachers, allowed the more tangible effects of—and passionate responses to—the Charter to be overlooked. From the start, however, we wished to avoid replicating incendiary discussions already circulating in the media.

### **Recommendations**

Reflecting upon our finished project, below we offer three recommendations for academics interested in pursuing a similar project of public intervention.

First, the style of *Tout Cela Est...* made it difficult to disseminate via mainstream media channels. In a traditional news media piece, the voices of academics might fall in the middle or at the end of a story, offering context to a given issue. Our documentary inverted this model, placing scholars' voices at the centre of the story to give breathing space to their contextual analyses. At no point in our process were interviewees set up as opponents, nor was there a central "character" in the documentary—

no single person was introduced as a victim, nor were we, as producers, stand-in characters. While we eschewed such models, we might caution others taking up similar activist engagements to weigh the pros and cons of more successful visual or storytelling strategies as part of their dissemination goals.

*Tout Cela Est...* showcases what can be pulled together with no budget and a complete reliance on volunteers, illuminating the lengths that must be taken to make activism in scholarship a priority. However, our second recommendation is to further investigate both university funding opportunities and non-institutional, or crowd-sourced, funding alternatives. For this project, such funding could have made it possible to delegate certain activities, such as professional editing, or to offer colleagues remuneration for translating and website building. The looming deadline of the legislation's passage, or an election decision, combined with producing a documentary in our free time, led to under-investigating potential avenues for other kinds of support as well, including the participation of members of affected communities outside our department.

Participatory video-making is associated with community development work and research, and can be a tool for building relationships based upon principles of empowerment (Kinson, 2003). Ultimately, *Tout Cela Est...* was not an example of community development work, though future work in this area could benefit from such an approach and broader networking. Notably, no participants in the documentary wear so-called ostentatious religious symbols in their daily lives. It can therefore appear as though interviewees and we, as producers, were speaking on behalf of those directly impacted by the Charter, further Othering absent minorities. This absence grounds our third and final recommendation: to better engage potential stakeholders, interviewees, and target audiences through all levels of production, not just at the interview or editing phase. This requires additional time and resources, but can grow a project's support base and make room for intervention to have greater impact on public policy.

### Taking action

In April 2014 an early provincial election put Québec's Liberal Party back in power, abruptly putting an end to the Charter of Québec Values and its brand of "reasonable accommodations." However, the Charter and problematic media representations stoked and solidified cross-cultural misconceptions, carrying a legacy of Othering those who did not fit a narrow definition of Québec values, including what should or should not be worn in secular settings. Into this context, *Tout Cela Est...* attempted to make academic ideas and tools for critically approaching the Charter accessible to the public. In this research in brief, we hope that by assessing how we brought academic critique and nuance to the public sphere, our shared reflections will help others taking up similar endeavours and experiments find additional strategies to further activist interventions in pressing public policy debates.

### Notes

1. This project was created first as a journalistic, or alternative media, response to a time-sensitive debate about government policy. Our aim was to educate the public, rather than to create an academic piece; this Research in Brief shares our reflections since making and distributing our web documentary.

2. As an example of form, consider the style of the 2009 film *Personally Speaking: A Long Conversation with Stuart Hall* (Dibb, 2009), wherein Hall is given a great deal of room to explore a range of issues.
3. The five parts of the documentary include:
  1. “Introduction”;
  2. “On Signs”;
  3. “On Gender”;
  4. “On Race”;
  5. “On Secularism.”
4. Interviewees discussed a cross-section of media material in circulation at the time. We explicitly cited the texts we used in the documentary, including the pamphlet “Un Québec pour tous” and the government website dedicated to explaining the Charter (Québec, n.d.). These were designed by the provincial government to explain the proposed legislation. We also cited mainstream media material published in the *Huffington Post* and *Huffington Post Québec* (including news stories about the experiences of Muslim women wearing hijabs in the midst of the public debate and Janette Bertrand’s 2013 open letter, “Aux femmes du Québec”), and we filmed headlines about the Charter from the pages of the *Montreal Gazette* and *Le Devoir*. To illustrate discourses circulating at the time of the Bouchard-Taylor commission, we also shared English and French headlines published in 2006–2007 in *The Globe and Mail*, *canoe.ca*, *La Presse*, *Le Journal de Montréal*, *The Toronto Star*, the *Gazette*, and *TVA Nouvelles*.
5. The video is produced in both official languages, and we enlisted volunteers, including Constance Lafontaine and Marilou St-Pierre, to help us translate interviews and text. Subtitles throughout the film switch between English and French as necessary. All on-screen text—for example segment titles or background information about the Charter—is also written in both languages.

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