It is always comforting to begin an intellectual discourse with a truism. To do so disarms a potentially rebellious audience by indicating that it is not about to be shocked out of its well-worn mental boots. Thus reassured, the listener or reader is likely to receive the presented message with a sense of benign benevolence. Furthermore, at this stage in the proceedings, the receiver is still alert and fresh and so unlikely to be lulled into sleep by confronting the obvious. I shall, therefore, open with a truism.

Communication research, policy and practice are each deeply affected by their national contexts. Each culture, each society, each state exhibits its own unique configuration of conditions, problems and potential solutions, reflecting not only universal forces but also the idiosyncracies of a particular place and time. And these specificities apply not only to the substance of communications matters but also to the way in which they are analyzed. Research strategy, the scientific infrastructures, predilections of governments and other funding agencies, the inarticulate major premises of scholars, and their consciously designed conceptual frameworks and research perspectives all reflect the characteristics of the site on which they emerge. Most important perhaps, the questions asked by researchers—and the questions not asked—are greatly conditioned by their societal and national setting.

Since the focus of this morning's session (according to the marching orders I received some months ago) is current research in international communication, I will dwell on some of the elements of the Canadian setting which colour its communications realities and research. In particular, I shall attempt to account for the dominance, on the Canadian scene, of concerns with national identity, cultural sovereignty, and what to many Americans looks like a paranoid wariness of being dominated by the United States. Much of what I say is old hat to Canadians and is intended particularly for the ears of American colleagues.

Time constraints compel me to paint with an immensely broad brush. Much of what I say consists of sweeping generalizations to which many exceptions apply. I nevertheless believe that my portrait is true in its essentials.

To a non-Canadian, the most striking feature of our communications scene is likely to be the extent to which policies and research are concerned with
ensuring that the country maintains its distinct identity. Although this is most manifest in the cultural domain, and particularly in broadcasting, it also applies to other aspects of telecommunications. The reasons, painfully obvious to Canadians, often baffle Canada's southern neighbours who, for the most part, find it totally incomprehensible that Canadians should be concerned about the overwhelming presence in their midst of American cultural products.

Canada's population is one-tenth that of the United States, and it is precariously stretched in a thin line along its border with the exuberant American colossus. Both French and English are official languages, and considerable efforts are made to maintain the viability of the French fact not only in Quebec, but also in provinces where francophones comprise a minority. While these attempts have by no means always been successful, the fact remains that the presence of two linguistic and cultural founding partners, whose linguistic rights are legally enshrined in the constitution, is deeply imbedded in the minds and practices of the population. Both English and French Canadians have gradually come to accept one another as partners in a unique process of country-building—although I suspect that they are not always fully conscious of this.

About 80 per cent of Canadians speak English and so provide a ready market for American books, magazines, films and broadcasts, not to mention other American goodies. At the same time, the domestic market for Canadian reading matter, films, and broadcasts in English is correspondingly smaller than the overall population figure of 26 million would suggest.

Politically, Canada is a very loose federation, in which the powers of the central government are matched and in some sectors even exceeded by the provincial (state) authorities. There is, therefore, a great deal of diversity which is deemed to be highly desirable. Similarly, a high degree of pluralism exists with regard to the country's ethnic minorities. The melting pot creed followed in the U.S. has never taken root in Canada. Here dualism, insofar as French and English culture are concerned, has been espoused simultaneously with the pursuit of multiculturalism, a policy designed to enable ethnic minorities to preserve a good deal of their cultural traditions even while fitting into one of the two official language groups. This openness with respect to ethnic diversity is matched by a wide tolerance for political and ideological diversity. Canada has a thriving social democratic party which has formed governments in several provinces, and Canadians have been much more willing than Americans to let the state provide social and health services and to become involved in public enterprises. A substantially larger proportion of Canadians than Americans belong to unions.
These are some of the factors which combine to support two propositions: (1) Canadians—even English Canadians—despite many similarities with Americans, are significantly different from them and (2) Canadian culture is unmistakably threatened by the massive presence in the country of American cultural goods and enterprises. The details have been cited endlessly and need not be repeated here (Meisel, 1986; 1985; 1984; 1984a; 1984b; 1981).

A quick glance at the shelves of any magazine shop provides a perfect microcosm of Canada's cultural landscape—a vast panorama of American items with only a sparse sprinkling of domestic goods. Only four per cent of television drama available on Canadian stations is Canadian. Both movie production and distribution are overwhelmingly foreign. Canadian films, including the amazing canon of the National Film Board, like so many other expressions of Canadian experience, cannot be shared—in large part because the foreign ownership of the distribution network discriminates against Canadian products. Variants of this situation occur in all cultural domains.

This state of affairs has caused governments and cultural organizations considerable concern and has brought into being a wide range of measures designed at least to equalize the opportunities for Canadian works of art and entertainment to have access to their own domestic markets. Among these measures, three are central: extensive broadcast regulation, stipulating, among other things, minimum levels of Canadian programming; subsidies to Canadian cultural activities, including the production of television programs; and measures inhibiting what is deemed culturally lethal competition by American enterprises.

The most notorious and contentious such measure is Bill C58. It prevents Canadian advertisers on U.S. television stations or in American magazines from declaring these advertising costs as tax-deductible business expenses. This issue has outraged American broadcasters, who have from time to time succeeded in persuading Congress and several administrations to retaliate, on this account, against Canada. The arguments on both sides are by no means simple, partly because they encapsulate much of the economic, social, emotional and political problems of Canadian cultural sovereignty and partly because, in American eyes, the matter is linked to other contentious issues such as the practice by Canadian cable companies of distributing American TV shows in Canada without compensating the rights holders. Bill C58 provides an excellent case study of many of the dilemmas posed for Canada's broadcasting system by disparities in the size of the American and Canadian markets, the structure of the broadcasting industry and the manner in which governments become involved in problems of cultural sovereignty (Hagelin/Janisch 1984; Arries 1984).
What we can and must talk about are some important aspects of the circumstances described so far. One is particularly intriguing: why are virtually all Americans, even some of the most enlightened, unable to understand Canada's cultural and communications nationalism?

One reason for American inability to fathom Canada's concerns is that the vast majority of Americans do not think that anything that they or their countrymen may do will harm Canada. How could it, when no such hurt is intended? Since they do not see any aggressive or imperialist elements in United States actions, Americans cannot imagine why anyone could possibly object to the presence in their midsts of books, magazines, films, TV shows, etc., emanating from so unthreatening, generous and splendid a country.

The rhetoric surrounding the pivotal place in American politics of freedom of information also contributes to American impatience with Canada's attempts to protect its cultural space against foreign domination. The First Amendment is seen, not as a particular American device, making sense within a specific historical and political setting, but as the expression of a universal law. Canadian content regulations and other such measures are seen as violating this fundamental tenet.

The fact that most Americans do not perceive any difference between themselves and Canadians--certainly English-speaking ones--also robs Canadian cultural nationalism of plausibility in their eyes. And finally, the strong faith of so many Americans in the sanctity and efficacy of market mechanisms clouds their vision of Canada. They do not understand why any people or government could wish to tamper with the salutary operation of the market for the sake of promoting heavy-handed policies related to a concept so imponderable, sensitive and subjective as national identity.

For their part, Canadians find it hard to understand these reactions. It seems self-evident to them that the ubiquitous and crushing presence of American cultural artifacts (often priced very modestly because of the huge size of the U.S. market) crowds out domestic voices. The space occupied by the imports prevents the fragile home-grown plants from taking root, growing, and being seen. Indigenous artists therefore experience difficulty in finding an audience, and their potential publics are deprived of sharing Canadian experiences. The myths, symbols, experiences and reference points of the available artistic fare are overwhelmingly foreign and so fail to nourish the collective memory of a common Canadian past and present.

Insofar as freedom of information is concerned, most Canadians share the American's belief in its importance, but they recognize that there are
circumstances in which the national interest dictates that it cannot be considered as an absolute good. There are circumstances when the requirements of national security and survival must be allowed to impede the totally unbridled exchange of information. Transborder data flows, broadcast content, and certain aspects of publishing are some of the areas considered by Canadians to be so essential to their national survival that they are among the fields in which their government's regulation, control and subvention are justified.

The idea that Canadians are in effect just Americans living north of the forty-eighth parallel strikes most Canadians of either language group as being plain ridiculous. While the precise differences and the quintessential Canadian character often elude definition, Canadians feel and know themselves to be different from their neighbours. There is also a pretty widespread sense that the U.S.A. is not quite the ideal or superior country so many of its citizens and leaders often imagine. While there is an enormous reservoir of goodwill, affection and even a sense of companionship with respect to the U.S., there is also a certain scepticism about its boasts of being the perfect society. Canadians perceive a violent, racist, and in some respects uncaring world south of them, run by a government which exhibits many of the traits characteristic of all super-powers pursing their national interests under the guise of humanitarianism. Living in a small, weak, and tolerant country, Canadians are often dismayed by the positions adopted by the U.S., whether it is in relation to Central America or Libya or in the spread of nuclear weapons. The Canadians' colonial past and membership in both the Commonwealth and the Francophonie have endowed them with an abiding suspicion that all-powerful actors on the international stage engage in deeply questionable activities which threaten the smaller and less ambitious members of the world community. In that sense, Canadians share the perspective of the third world. So, while they find much to be admired in the United States, they do not see that it has yet attained perfection and they do not wish to become like it in all particulars. To the contrary, Canadians cherish their own individuality—even though that may not always be clearly defined.

One of the differences prized by Canadians relates to the American predilection for relying on market forces to allocate resources. In our eyes, a great many human concerns are too important to be left to the unwilled, chaotic and often rapacious features of markets. Telecommunications and broadcasting are prime examples. We therefore reject the idea widely supported in the United States that matters affecting our cultural and even economic sovereignty can be left to the blind vagaries of the market instead of being subject to policies reflecting certain deep-seated features of our value system.
You may think that I have hopelessly lost my way and that patriotic passion has driven me into territory far removed from our topic. Not so. The matters I all too briefly surveyed, while by no means embracing all relevant features of Canada's communication scene, nevertheless point to a critical dimension of the country's communications policies and research. In the few minutes remaining, I will trace the implications of the foregoing for our research.

Some way back, as you know, I stressed two points: Canada is unmistakably different from the U.S., but its cultural distinctiveness is threatened by the strong influence exerted by American culture. Largely because of this, research on international communications questions is often related to the domestic dimension. The two can, in fact, not always be separated. What, then, are the salient features of Canada's efforts in these domains, given the particular geographic, historical, demographic, socio-political, and economic conditions of the country?

We should note, in the first place, that Canada has found problems of communications to be of central importance and has, therefore, produced important work in this area. It is probably no exaggeration to say that in no other field have Canadians made such noteworthy contributions to the international intellectual community. McLuhan is no doubt the best-known Canadian thinker in this field, but there are many others whose work is at least as important. Innis stands out, as does Northrop Frye. The latter reminds us that a great many Canadian literary scholars have made significant contributions to our understanding of how the exchange of ideas in the Canadian space has contributed to the nature of our value system and our life.

Second, a large part of Canada's research effort in our domain focuses on the relationship between communications, culture, and a sense of cohesion and national identity. We are conscious of the problems posed not only by our linguistic and cultural dualism, but also by the consequences of our proximity to the United States. Questions relating to dependency hold a strong fascination both in their domestic and transnational dimensions.

A third preoccupation, which may well puzzle observers from highly articulated societies, concerns the nature of Canadian identity and nationality. Canadians, scholars included, are forever searching for precise definitions of what it is to be Canadian. Indeed, this naval-gazing obsession with one's own national character is probably among the most distinguishing features of Canadians.
A fourth notable aspect of Canada's research in communication is that so much of it is undertaken by governments. The number of Royal Commissions, Task Forces, Parliamentary Inquiries, and reports emanating from government departments, in our areas of research, is truly astounding. Both the federal and provincial authorities have sponsored a large number of relevant studies, strongly complementing the work of individual scholars. This heavy "official" presence in the communications literature attests to a point noted earlier, that Canadians are more disposed than Americans to rely on public agencies to tackle societal questions.

A fifth characteristic is the richness of the ideological perspective within which communication research occurs. There is a very strong tradition of critical communications research and of studies broadly falling within various neo-Marxist frameworks. Whole "schools" have emerged, around such centres as the Communications Department at the Université de Montréal or that of Simon Fraser University, which have challenged the liberal approaches pursued by more traditional scholars.

No doubt because of the complexity of Canada's federal arrangements, and because of the immense importance of the United States, and also because of the greater ideological heterodoxy, many of the questions pursued by communications scholars in Canada have a distinctly political dimension. The politics of communications is thus a subject receiving more attention than is the case, for instance, in the U.S.A.

And finally, the influence of American practices and culture on Canada, and the issues arising as a consequence, attract particular attention. And while many studies accept the major premises underlying American values and policies, there is also a very substantial and important body of work which clearly challenges the suppositions on which U.S. research and policies are often built. It is for this reason that in international telecommunications negotiations and the background preparation associated with them, Canadians often take positions which differ considerably from those espoused by their neighbours.

This, and the general preoccupation of Canadians with their cultural sovereignty and the ability to do things their own way, not only puzzles many Americans, as I have noted, but also irritates them. Yet they would not be so surprised if they took a good look at their own ways. How much non-American television is available on U.S. screens, particularly in the all-important commercial sector? The seeming peevish parochialism of Canada may not be quite as unique as it seems at first glance.
Some years ago, in addressing a largely American audience on a topic similar to the one I am pursuing here, I was able to sum up and conclude the argument with an anecdote and a question (Meisel 1983:10). This literary device seemed to work quite well, and I would like to try it again, naturally providing a new text.

First the anecdote: some Quebecers have recently produced a very successful feature film exploring contemporary social mores. The film is called *The Decline of the American Empire* and it has elicited a lot of interest not only in Canada but also in the United States.

And now for the question: Why is Hollywood planning to remake this film in an American setting?

REFERENCES


