

Canadian Multicultural Broadcasting Policy at Crossroads: Mixed Notions of Participatory Democracy and Cultural Diversity

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Abstract

This paper examines the problematical definition of minority voices shaped by the Canadian multicultural broadcasting policy framework. Although the framework adheres to equal rights and intends to encourage media production and dissemination by Canadian population other than 'Founding Nations' (i. e. English and French), it limits the scope of media practices based on the monolingual notion of "ethnic programming." I argue that, because democratic notions, such as the freedom of expression and equal participation, are only partially realized in the policy framework, racialized populations end up being included only as media consumers in the public domain while the imagined national space is maintained as a "white settler society." In order to make television a "public service" as it was originally intended in the Broadcasting Act, I assert that the prevalent idea of cultural preservation in Canadian multiculturalism should be revised to foster a common space for civic participation.

Keywords : Multiculturalism, broadcasting, racism, Canada, democracy

1. Introduction

As exemplified by the Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle Programme (1967-1980) run by the National Film Board and various government departments, giving a voice to the voiceless has been a significant, if not central, concern in mainstream media productions in Canada (Hénaut 1991). While a desire for social change is a vital force in media practices, 'who defines the change and how' are the questions that must be continuously engaged in order to truly realize equity in a society. Since the public media, including broadcasting system, is an information network governed by the state and a type of commodity that facilitates global capitalism, the media's role in participatory democracy cannot be simply assumed. The democratization of the media has been actively sought by social movements and community-based initiatives while resisting the legitimization of corporate power and national security, dissemination of consumerist and individualist values, mobilization of pleasure and affect in the shaping of public concerns (Boler ed.

2008, Hackett 2000, Zimmermann 2000). At the basis of this tension between media production and democratic ideals are the notions of freedom of speech and freedom of expression, as well as equal participation, which constitute the ideological foundations of democratic society and the expected role for the media therein. In the struggles for media democratization, the freedom of speech is a value to be defended and actively pursued; access to media production is a vital asset for equal participation in societal decision-making. A problem arises, however, when these political discourses operate in accordance with an implicit yet persistent exclusionary mechanism of a society, such as racism. This paper scrutinizes how the ideological foundations of democracy are appropriated in the Canadian multicultural broadcasting policy framework. I argue that, because democratic notions, such as the freedom of expression and equal participation, are only partially included in the policy framework, racialized populations end up being included only as media consumers in the public domain while the imagined national space is maintained as a “white settler society” (Razack eds. 2002).

2. The Development of Canadian Multicultural Policy

Canadian multicultural broadcasting policy is based on the idea that the state is made of three “constituencies” (Roth 1998), each of which has distinctive interests and right issues: Aboriginal peoples whose residence preceded that of the European settlers; the Canadians/Canadien(ne)s who claim their citizenship rights; immigrant populations who attempt to maintain, to varying degrees, ways of living that reflect their ethnocultural identities. The establishment of separate policies for ethnic (1985) and Aboriginal broadcasting undertakings (1983) implements the ideological distinction between the ‘founding peoples’ (that is, English and French) and ‘others’. It would be fair to say that the “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983) of English and French citizens are not simply the past origin of the Canadian state but prescribed as two directions of on-going assimilation for immigrants and indigenous peoples. At the same time, Canada’s multicultural policy is a set of federal measures in order to “manage its diversity” and maintain the heterogeneity of the state’s population (Henry 2002, p. 232).¹⁾

Canada’s ethnocultural profile is commonly constructed from linguistic and racial diversity, as well as the countries of origin among the total population. In the 2006 Census, approximately 1.2 million people identified themselves as an Aboriginal person, that is North American Indian, Métis or Inuit, which accounts for 3.8 percent of the total population of Canada. People whose first language was not English or French constitute 20.1 percent of the population. Among this “allophone” population, more than 200 non-official mother tongues were reported in 2006, while each language is spoken by a small proportion of the country’s population.²⁾ Among the total population, 57.8 percent had English as their first language, and 22.1 percent had French, maintaining a downward trend for more than a half century. In 2006, immigrants constituted approximately 20 percent of the total population.³⁾ In the early 1950s, 95 percent of immigrants

were Caucasians from European countries and the United States, whereas, in the last decade, 60 percent of the immigrants came from Asia, including Hong Kong, India, China and the Philippines, (Henry 2002, p. 233). In the 2006 census, people of colour accounted for 16 percent of the population in Canada. While ‘people of colour’ (or racialized minorities) tend to be associated with ‘coming from outside,’ three in ten people of colour were born in Canada.

The announcement of “multiculturalism within a bilingual framework” (Oct 8, 1971) under Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau marks one of the major turning points in Canadian history and signaled a hope for “the harmonious cooperation of all ethnic groups in the Canadian country as a whole” (B and B 1965, 52; also see Roth 1998). Yet, advocates of social justice have accurately pointed out the limitations or biases in Canadian multiculturalism: namely that it only facilitates the tolerance of the majority towards the minority (Henry 2002); the ideologies and cultural practices of multiculturalism rather promote the hegemony of ‘Founding Nations’, that is, British and French (Bannerji 1990, Bissoondath 2004, Porter 1987).

When Prime Minister Trudeau launched the initial multicultural policy framework in 1971, there were two issues in how multiculturalism was conceived. First of all, Trudeau supported multiculturalism as long as it was maintained within a bilingual framework. The Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism (1963-1970) was originally created to offer recommendations to develop equal footings between English and French under the Pearson government as a solution to the intensifying Quebec anti-colonial movement. Consequently, the B and B commission provided a foundational ideological force for Trudeau to implement multiculturalism. In terms of the ideological effect of multiculturalism, Eve Haque argues that the Official Language Act (1969) and the Multicultural Policy (1971) served:

[T]o both erase the founding status of Indigenous peoples and render the ‘Other ethnic groups’ (which is how all non-French and non-English ‘immigrant groups’ were defined throughout the inquiry) as mere cultural communities peripheral to the now-acknowledged ‘two founding races’, the French and English. Specifically, the shift from overt racial distinctions between founding and other ethnic groups onto the terrain of language and culture meant that racial exclusions could be disavowed even as they were smuggled back in through a differential recognition of language and cultural rights (Haque 2010, p. 81).

Second, ethnic identity was considered as a voluntary act along the line of the freedom of expression in the 1971 Multicultural Policy. A culture to be preserved by the federal multicultural policy was considered as the matter of choice rather than an inheritance and circumstance that goes beyond one’s own intention or recognition. Moreover, the Trudeau framework “emphasized the individual, rather than the collective, right to preserve one’s ethnocultural identity” (Roth 1998) and the funding of cultural programs was only directed for groups and individuals who expressed their desire to preserve their ethnocultural heritage and who could demonstrate need for support

in such efforts (Kallen 1982). Scholars also criticized that this definition of multiculturalism could promote cultural expressions to serve for exotification of culture, but did not acknowledge the actual need for ethnic minorities to assimilate into English or French mainstream for economic and political survival and denied them access to political and economic opportunities (Peter 1979).

In response to these criticisms, the Charter of Rights and Freedom (1982) proclaimed that “Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability.” The Canadian Multicultural Act (1988) included policy frameworks supporting both the maintenance of ethnic cultures as well as the promotion of civil rights and equal political and economic opportunities. Although these two legislations intend to protect and promote people’s equality, the official (i.e. public) language of Canada is maintained as French and English as decided in the Constitution and the Official Language Act. The dominant status of the two nations not only creates a ‘colour line’ or ‘glass ceiling,’ in professional development for non-English and non-French speakers. It also maintains that, I suggest, as long as they are exchanged in a non-English or non-French language, people’s concerns and issues remain ‘private’ rather than ‘public’ in Canada. This leads to a significant gap between the discursive influence that an English- or French- speaking individual can assume on the rest of the population and those who try to maintain distinctive cultural identities but want to approach the rest of the population to share their concerns. In a nutshell, the definitions of multiculturalism, civic rights, and equal opportunities are conflated in the Canadian multicultural policy framework, with the result that ethnic ‘minority voices’ have a minor influence on public matters and are discouraged to go beyond their own segregated groups.

3. Cultural Packaging through the Broadcasting Policy Framework

The policy framework for multicultural broadcasting exemplifies this conflation between multiculturalism, civic rights and equal opportunities. The current Broadcasting Act (1991) declares that: “through its programming and the employment opportunities arising out of its operations, [Canadian broadcastings] serve the needs and interests, and reflect the circumstances and aspirations, of Canadian men, women and children, including equal rights, the linguistic duality and multicultural and multiracial nature of Canadian society and the special place of aboriginal peoples within that society.” (Broadcasting Act, section 3[1] [d][iii]).⁴⁾

Besides English and French broadcastings, radio and television broadcastings using other languages were previously only permitted as an exception.⁵⁾ *Broadcasting Policy Reflecting Canada’s Linguistic and Cultural Diversity* (1985, or the 1985 policy) provided, for the first time, a comprehensive policy framework for ‘ethnic’ broadcasting, that is, radio and television broadcastings in languages other than English, French or indigenous languages. The Policy states:

The CRTC, and its predecessor, the Board of Broadcast Governors, recognized that the Canadian broadcasting system had the potential to serve the cultural and social needs of new Canadians and to contribute to the development of Canada's multicultural character by promoting social harmony, tolerance, understanding and the exchange of knowledge, culture and beliefs. (CRTC 1985-139).

Following the 1985 policy, new additions in the Ethnic Broadcasting Policy (or the 1999 policy) are "designed to provide more flexibility to the broadcasting industry and to streamline regulatory requirements" while "still ensuring that the core objectives of the [1985] policy continue to be met" (CRTC 1999-117).

The 1999 Policy instituted conceptions of ethnic culture and community into broadcastings as follows:

An ethnic program is one, in any language, that is specifically directed to any culturally or racially distinct group other than one that is Aboriginal Canadian or from France or the British Isles. It also includes cross-cultural programming provided, once again, that it is specifically directed to any culturally or racially distinct group other than one that is Aboriginal Canadian or from France or the British Isles (CRTC 1999-117).

In the ethnic broadcasting policy framework, 'culture' in multiculturalism is a social group that is distinguished by language use. The 1999 policy requires ethnic television stations to "devote at least 60% of each broadcast month" and ethnic radio stations to "devote at least 60% of each broadcast week" for ethnic programming. Although ethnic programming can use English, French, a third-language or a combination of languages, the policy requires "ethnic radio and television stations to devote at least half of their schedules to programming in third languages, that is, in languages other than French, English or an Aboriginal language" (CRTC 1999-117).⁶⁾ Therefore, ethnic programming that can communicate in an official language of Canada represents only 10 percent of monthly television programming, or weekly radio programming. On the other hand, regular (non-ethnic) stations can devote 14 percent of the airtime for third-language programming, unless an increase up to 40 percent is approved by CRTC.

4. Concluding Remarks

I argue that the Canadian multicultural broadcasting policy does not accommodate or reflect the shifting and diverse cultural realities of 'minority' populations – such as acculturation to the mainstream and/or translocality – experienced by an increasing number of immigrants from Asia, Africa and the Middle East, as well all generations of 'ethnic' Canadian citizens. Their concerns and interests are not neatly separated by linguistic boundaries or geographic identities. Their political,

cultural and social identities are flexible and multifaceted. However, the policy framework imposes divides between generations and geographic identities. In order to truly realize broadcasting as a public service for all people in Canada as intended in the Broadcasting Act, the ideas of exclusive national identities and cultural preservation prevalent in the policy framework should be revised to foster a common space for civic participation. For example, in order to counter persistent racism and ethnic discrimination in society, ‘minority-focus’ broadcasting, which flexibly accommodate linguistic barriers but allow the formation of collective voices among racial and ethnic ‘minorities’, would be more suitable than an ‘ethnic’ broadcasting.

I should note here that, before the establishment of the first Broadcasting Act (1932), the French-speaking province Quebec, among other provinces, claimed their independent broadcasting rights and fought at the court against the federal government who want to dominate the broadcasting rights. The provinces claimed their right to each establish their own broadcasting law or control over cable companies. However, the Canadian government won all the cases (Thomas 1992). Therefore, multiculturalism was introduced to broadcasting legislations after the federal government established its state system to manage and supervise nation-wide broadcastings through the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). As a result, it is taken for granted in today’s political discourse that the realization of multicultural society through broadcastings cannot assume a transnational or supranational body of governance, or independence from the Canadian state, but is only realized based on the national interests of Canada and under federal supervision. While lacking domestic support for racial/ethnic minorities’ dialogical participation in the public sphere, media industries, including film, the Internet and social networking services, are transnationally connecting middle-class consumers at home and abroad, and reinstating geographically-based notion of cultural identities.

Notes

- 1) Canadian multicultural policy “to manage diversity” is considered influential for countries such as Australia, which takes federal multicultural policy, in addition to Spain, Belgium, South Africa and Russia (Henry, 2002).
- 2) For example, people whose mother tongue was a Chinese language accounted for 3.3% of the population, while Italian and German each accounted for 1.5% of the Canadian population.
- 3) The data is taken from the 2006 Census in the Statistics Canada homepage, unless another reference is specified.
<http://www12.statcan.ca/census-recensement/index-eng.cfm>
- 4) Broadcasting Act.
http://laws.justice.gc.ca/eng/B-9.01/page-1.html#anchorbo-ga:l_I-gb:s_3
- 5) Three radio stations using languages other than English or French gained broadcasting license since 1962. CFMT based in Toronto (a.k.a. OMNI television) obtained a license in 1979. The local pay-per-view television station, World View based in B.C. was licensed in 1982. The satellite cable service China Vision and Teletatino also gained licenses in 1984. Additionally, English and French stations produced programs in other languages than the two, though irregularly. Cable community channels broadcasted programs

produced by local ethnic communities (CRTC 1985-139). *Native Broadcasting Policy* was established in 1990 (CRTC1990-89). My paper primarily discusses 'ethnic broadcasting' as what is defined as non-English, non-French and non-Indigenous. Although Aboriginal peoples are sometimes categorized as 'people of colour' or visible minority along with other racial and ethnic groups, the political interests such as land claim and sovereignty are distinctive to indigenous communities. I consider the political connotations of indigenous struggles should not be diluted by confusion with "ethnic minorities" as a whole.

- 6) For television, the audio portion of the program determines the language, when subtitles accompany the program. For radio, the spoken word component determines which ethnic group is being served.

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