

Guest blog: How Canadian is CanCon?

Submitted by Matthew Johnson on 02 Mar 2010.

This is a special guest blog by Jonathan Avery, a recent M.A. graduate with a degree in communication and media studies from the University of Ottawa.

Have you ever wondered why Canadian private broadcasting networks such as CTV and CanWest air certain television programs over others? Why, for instance, does CanWest air *House*, or CTV air *Grey's Anatomy*, over other television programs?

It would be too simple to suggest that a network's choice to purchase the rights to a program solely comes down to affordability and audience preferences – that audience preferences dictate the types of programs networks purchase in order to maximize the size of their audience. In the Canadian market, however, it's not so simple: broadcasting regulations have a significant impact on the types of programs made available to Canadian audiences. Some would argue that these policies not only constrain programming choices that should be left to Canadian audiences, but undermine the ability of the Canadian broadcasting industry to compete with our American neighbors. Others, on the other hand, argue that these regulations serve a vital cultural imperative and are necessary to create a unique Canadian broadcasting industry that can compete on an international level.

Canadian television is regulated by the Canadian Broadcasting Act. The goal at the heart of the Act is to strengthen Canadian society by providing content that reflects Canadian attitudes, opinions, ideas, values and artistic creativity. The Act requires that the Canadian broadcasting industry be owned and controlled by Canadians, and further demands that it encourage the development of the Canadian expression and maximize the use of Canadian talent and creative resources.

The Act also includes rules regarding Canadian content (commonly known as CanCon) that require a specific amount of air time that must be devoted to Canadian programming. To ensure this occurs, Canadian private broadcasters must devote, on an annual basis, 60 percent of their overall television content to Canadian programming measured over the course of the entire broadcasting day, and at least 50 per cent between 6 p.m. and midnight. This does not include sports, national or regional news programming. To be classified as "Canadian," a program is judged on the following criteria: whether its producer and key creative personnel are Canadian, the amount paid to Canadians for services provided to make the program, and the amount spent in Canada on lab processing.

Canadian broadcasting regulations, therefore, restrict the types of programs Canadian private broadcasters can purchase and air by requiring a specific amount of time devoted to Canadian programs. Regardless of Canadian audience preferences, Canadian private broadcasters must adhere to these policies. They cannot simply purchase the rights to any program they choose, even if it would attract a large Canadian audience. The question is, are these policies doing what they are supposed to be doing? Is favouring Canadian content genuinely enhancing the cultural fabric of Canadian society?

A simple glance at weekly prime time television on CTV and Global Television shows a schedule dominated by such shows as *House*, *CSI*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *24* etc. Though produced by American firms, each of these shows has associations with Canada. For instance David Shore, one of the co-creators of *House*, was born in London Ontario; *CSI* is co-produced by Alliance Atlantis Communications, which is affiliated with CanWest Global; Sandra Oh, one of the stars of *Grey's Anatomy*, is from Nepean, Ontario; and several members of the cast of *24*, including Keifer Sutherland, are Canadian-born. However, all of these programs – filmed in the U.S. and dealing with American subject matter – are overwhelmingly American in their overall impact.

These programs may feature Canadian artistic talent and may be associated with Canadian production companies, one of the requirements of the Act, but how do these programs enhance Canadian culture? David Taras, a known Canadian communication scholar from the University of Calgary, argues in his book *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media* (2001) that many programs deemed "Canadian" under CanCon rules do very little for the enhancement of Canadian culture. In this book, Taras states: "Canadian TV will be Canadianized by first being Americanized" (186). Although Taras was commenting on programming available during the 80s and 90s, his arguments still apply even amidst policy changes made in 1999 to

increase Canadian content production – that even though these programs may star Canadian born actors or be produced by Canadian production companies, they focus almost exclusively on American themes, issues and settings.

Of course, there are successful Canadian programs that do highlight Canadian culture. Programs such as *Corner Gas* (CTV), *Flash Point* (CTV), *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (CTV), *Whistler* (Global), *The Guard* (Global) and *Degrassi: The New Generation* (CTV) all air during primetime hours. These programs not only take place in Canada but also do not hide the fact that they are filmed in Canada. Would these distinct Canadian programs exist if the Canadian Broadcasting Act did not? Without the Canadian Broadcasting Act, would there be any imperative to produce distinct Canadian programs? In general it is more expensive to produce original programming than to purchase it, and audiences often prefer American programming. For Canadian broadcasters, the costs of creating distinctly Canadian shows often outweigh the benefits – recent successful exports, such as *Flashpoint* and *Being Erica*, only illustrate the rule that in order for Canadian programs to be successful they have to be indistinguishable from American shows.

As more Canadians turn to the Internet for their media needs, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunication Commission (CRTC) is becoming increasingly concerned over its ability to ensure Canadians are exposed to Canadian content. While the Internet provides access to endless amounts of content, though, it also provides the opportunity for Canadians to be involved in the production of their own content; without the need to appeal to a mass audience, online content may be free to be more “Canadian” than what is available on Canadian network television. (For example, the National Film Board’s online archive is one of the most popular sources of video accessed through iPhones.) It is possible that within ten years the notion of “CanCon” will be an anachronism – and that we may be consuming more Canadian content than ever.

References

Taras, David. (2001). *Power and betrayal in the Canadian media*. Canada: Broadview Press.

Jonathan Avery is a recent M.A. graduate with a degree in communication and media studies from the University of Ottawa. You can access more material written by Mr. Avery at <http://www.knowyourmedia.com>

Reading Questions

1. What are the arguments regarding the broadcasting regulations we have in Canada?
2. Canadian television is regulated by what? What is its goal?
3. What is meant by CanCon?
4. According to the Canadian Broadcasting Act, what percentage of overall television content must be Canadian? What percentage between 6pm and midnight?
5. What is required for a program to be judged “Canadian”?
6. What argument regarding CanCon regulations does David Taras make in his book?
7. What are some examples of primetime television shows that feature Canadian content?
8. What is the CRTC concerned about as more Canadians access content on the internet? What is the other side of this argument?