ABSTRACT

The Canadian broadcast sector has been the subject of many policy initiatives and much hand wringing. This article uses a production study of the reality television sector in Toronto, Canada’s centre for English-language production, to consider how the concerted move towards an entrepreneurial, market-driven television economy since the late 1990s has dovetailed with the rise of the global trade in formats. The article considers some of the key policy moves in this period of neo-liberalization, including the de-regulation of ownership, the introduction of group licensing, and shifts in the definition of ‘priority’ Canadian content. The article concludes that the set of related shifts in both technologies and considerations about television’s social and economic role has led to an almost purely market-driven (though state subsidized) system that disadvantages both smaller industry players and the broadcast system’s public mandate. The challenges experienced in Canada during this period are not unique, making it into a case study for small market television nations.

KEYWORDS

Canadian television formats
global television
CRTC
reality television
producers
small nation television
The industrial production of media in Canada has taken many forms – from foreign location shooting to the import and export of cultural products – all of which bind Canadian media into global markets. However, arguably, it was not until the shift to neo-liberal frameworks of cultural trade in the late 1980s that the industrial element of Canadian culture was made central to cultural policy. Even after the signing of a free trade agreement with the United States in 1988, ‘Canadianization’ was still being used by European nations to describe, with apprehension, the process of being overrun with foreign television production (Pike 1998: 1279). At that time, Canada represented the fate of a small nation that had ceded control of its airwaves to an alien culture. Today, the same term is used in merely descriptive ways to refer to the adoption of global formats to Canadian television (Wagman 2013: 613). In some ways, both uses of the term refer to the same process, wherein programming that originates in a ‘foreign’ context comes to play a substantial role in domestic media consumption. Both uses acknowledge the role of the nation state in facilitating the global circulation of media products and in placing certain restrictions on access. However, today’s usage speaks volumes about the changes that have gone on in the intervening decades. Where once these foreign influences were judged to be detrimental to the fragile domestic media ecology, today they are presented as providing a viable approach to producing both Canadian content and lucrative cultural commodities.

Canadian broadcast policy is vulnerable to numerous attacks. Common criticisms suggest that it is protectionist, coddling an unsustainable national industry; or, alternatively, that it supports Canadian industrial interests at the expense of representing the public interest. It is frequently accused of being overly focussed on the national scale, with little consideration of the needs of regional and local producers and citizens, some of whom have transnational connections. And its encouragement of the international location industry (through subsidies) leads to the ‘cartographic invisibility’ (McElroy and Noonan 2016, in this issue) that can hinder the medium’s mandate to help citizens form an attachment to place. Indeed, the literature on Canadian broadcasting has long been polarized between cultural economists, who posit that the industry is just like any other and should be de-regulated (Acheson and Maule 1992), and political economists who argue that successive governments have not adequately protected the Canadian broadcasting mandate with its sacred democratic trust (Collins 1990; Pike 1998; Raboy 1990). However, perhaps the most compelling argument of all suggests that the Canadian broadcasting system continues to express the contradictions typical of small nation media policy (Ali 2012): namely, to both bolster the national industry and produce meaningful, distinctive national content as well as a platform for democratic citizenship. Certainly, it has been recognized that the regulatory body, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), has long used the rhetoric of national culture and the public interest to bolster the fortunes of the private sector (Pike 1998; Beaty and Sullivan 2006).

In what follows, I present a story about the emergence and growth of reality television formats over the past two decades in Canada that takes into account their relation to changes in regulation that have led to the marketization of television, the consolidation of the ownership of broadcasting by the telecommunication sector, cuts to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the public broadcaster, and the introduction of digital signals. These changes are linked in no small part to the global rise of trade in formats that
followed on from widespread de-regulation of television industries in Europe (Chalaby 2012; Esser 2013). It also illustrates how ‘the success and sustainability of the television production sector in small nations remains oriented to the market of larger dominant nations’ (McElroy and Noonan 2016, in this issue). This research is based in part on the results of a production study undertaken in 2013 in Toronto, the centre of English-language television production in Canada. The research team undertook semi-structured interviews with ten prominent producers and broadcasters involved with the reality TV industry in Toronto.1 Most of the people in our sample came of age before the advent of the lifestyle channels (on which many of the programmes air) in the mid-1990s and got their start in the national broadcasters from the period of dominance for the national television networks: CBC, CTV and Global. When the television industry was de-regulated and expanded in the mid-1990s, these workers were well positioned to take up new jobs as either broadcast executives or independent producers. Many gave up stable industry positions to become television entrepreneurs and, over the years, most had played several roles in the TV industry, from network executive to independent producer. Another, smaller element of our sample emigrated from Britain in the last five years as international companies expanded to Canada to take advantage of favourable new policies. Based on these findings, I argue that we must resist the urge to describe the debasement of ‘quality’ Canadian television by the commercialism of the global marketplace and consider instead the characteristic contradictions introduced by the Canadian broadcast regulator in this neo-liberal phase of Canadian television. Market forces and media policies have worked together to produce the current configuration.

**LEGISLATING CANADIAN CONTENT**

Although Canada boasts a large landmass, at 35 million its population is relatively small. Of these, 22% are native French speakers who consume mainly French media. Canada also has sizable Aboriginal and immigrant populations and its citizens speak dozens of languages other than French and English, which has presented a cultural problem for the state since confederation. Sharing a language and a border, the Canadian broadcast system has been characterized since its outset by an audience that often seemed more interested in American programming than in what was being produced for it locally. Government legislation since the 1930s has attempted to focus English-speaking Canadians on broadcast signals originating in their own country. Yet, reduced audiences for domestic fare meant that private broadcasters pushed back and demanded the right to broadcast higher-drawing popular programming. As in other small nations, Canada’s television industry functions in multiple ways that often end up contradicting one another. On the one hand, television is charged with constructing national identity and contributing to the functioning of one or more public spheres. On the other, it must support local industrial interests. As McElroy and Noonan (2016) note elsewhere in this issue, small national television industries serve as a hinge between internal and external pressures and conditions. In 1961 the Canadian state introduced Canadian content regulations for television in an attempt to help quantify the patriotism of content (with higher levels of Canadian content expected from CBC, the national public broadcaster) (Edwardson 2008). Since their introduction, the regulations were observed according to the letter of the law. If a broadcaster was compelled to air Canadian content to a minimum of 60% of the broadcast
year and 50% of the six PM to midnight slot (as they have been since 1970), there were numerous ways to avoid airing it in prime time; in other words, viewership was irrelevant to the hours logged. Producing ‘quality’ production for prime time had to be encouraged with cultural, as opposed to economic, rationales. In effect, broadcasters were prodded, through their licensing agreements, to make shows that they could not afford and, in return, they were allowed to subsidize the costs with imported American fare that was cheap and lucrative. For the most part, broadcasters satisfied their Canadian content quotas with news, current events and sports programming, much cheaper to produce than drama but seen to be of equally significant value.

In 1983, the CRTC introduced ‘priority programming’ requirements that set programming minimums for Canadian drama, music, and variety shows, and tied broadcast licenses to expenditure commitments (Coles 2006: 525). This policy was seen to bind industry development and Canadian content provision together in concrete ways. Changes to media regulation in the 1990s were based on an ideological shift to a free market entrepreneurial approach to television that began in the 1980s and happened simultaneously with market expansion in many European countries as well (Edwardson 2008; Moran 2013: 9). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into effect on 1 January 1994, drastically altered the cultural industries in Canada. Since then, there has been a concerted shift towards an export-oriented industry, provoking a new emphasis on the global trade of cultural products. In effect, even before the impact of the Internet, as the cable dial expanded, and sponsorship was diluted, production costs were pushed down and new strategies for attracting audiences emerged.

Around this time, a number of policy changes helped to promote the industrialization of Canadian television. In 1995, the CRTC granted licenses to 25 new cable stations and introduced the tax credit system for subsidizing the audio-visual industry and the Canadian Audio-Visual Certification Office (CAVCO) to administer it. In 1997, the Task Force on the Implementation of Digital Television released a report recommending the shift to digital in terms both of protection of the Canadian media industry from a burgeoning ‘satellite grey market’ picking up US signals and the possibility for Canada to be at the forefront of television exporting nations (Neverson 2010: 32). In point of fact, it was ‘primarily an economic decision to use American technology’ (Bonin 2010: 141). Following on from these changes, regulations to prevent monopolies and concentration of ownership across media industries were loosened and the telecommunication industry effectively merged with the broadcasting sector hoping to cash in on the promises of first digital and later mobile technologies.

The CRTC enabled this shift with the stated intention of increasing Canadian television’s competitiveness at an international level and, in 1999, it released a new television policy framework (CRTC 1999). In this new policy, the CRTC expanded priority programming categories and removed broadcaster expenditure requirements (Coles 2006: 525). The impact on the production of dramatic programming was immediate and drastic. In 1999, 753 hours of Canadian drama were broadcast; by 2002 it was only 486 (Coles 2006: 528). Although statistics are hard to come by, since that time, reality and lifestyle programming have grown to take an increasingly significant portion of Canadian broadcasting production.

In 2001 the number of channels was expanded again with the launch of over 200 digital channels. The specialty channels included a range of sports,
lifestyle, youth, urban, women’s and other niche programming options. But as the years wore on, it became apparent that many of them were unsustainable within a purely economic model. The Women’s Television Sports Network (WTSN), for instance, begun in 2001, was off the air by 2003 (Neverson 2010). W Network, which started out as the Women’s Television Network in 1995, was rebranded in the late 1990s when it shifted from information to lifestyle to bring up its ratings. Life Network was also launched in 1995 by Alliance (later Alliance Atlantis), revamped as Slice in 2007, bought by CanWest in 2008 and then taken over by Shaw in 2010 and reworked into a station devoted to ‘guilty pleasure’ viewing (their slogan: ‘Slice is my vice’) (Matheson 2010). Thus, the CRTC helped to launch numerous channels that, at least in their license applications, paid lip service to Canadian content and social diversity. However, once licensed, due to lax policing, it has been possible for them to morph over time into almost unrecognizable commercial versions of their original agreements.

Part of the contradiction stems from the fact that, in the terms of the Broadcasting Act 1991, the CRTC is tasked at once with licensing broadcasters and ensuring their compliance with Canadian content regulations, something that is only monitored retroactively at periodic license renewals, which may be held as infrequently as every seven years. By the end of the 1990s, the CRTC had thrown the lot of Canadian broadcasting in with the largest media players capable of monetizing their productions in the international marketplace:

The broadcasting industry has been restructuring through ownership consolidation [wrote the authors of a 1999 CRTC report]. This has resulted in efficiencies and synergies which should provide increased investment in Canadian programming and a greater likelihood of the export of that programming. The Commission expects that the consolidation of broadcasting, production and communications companies will continue, to the benefit of Canadian audiences, the Canadian broadcasting system and the public interest.

(CRTC 1999, par. 8)

The result of this neo-liberal turn towards entrepreneurialism has been massive concentration of the broadcasting environment (Demers 2003). According to the Canadian Media Concentration Research Project results from 2013, the three biggest telecommunications companies in Canada – Bell, Rogers and Shaw – now account for 75% of all broadcast in English-Canada and 70% of all media industry profits. Working with dwindling state funding, public broadcasting achieves a risible market share of English language viewing of only 7%. In effect, the protection and promotion of the telecommunications industry’s takeover of the broadcasting industry trumped any of the other stated goals of the CRTC’s policy, such as serving audiences or benefiting the public interest (Canadian Media Concentration Research Project 2013).

One of the ways the CRTC made good on its promise to enable industry consolidation was to undertake renewal hearings for broadcast licenses held by corporations in a group. This so-called ‘group licensing’ policy allows large media companies to lower the percentage of Canadian content from 60 to 55% (and for some channels the reduction was even more extreme: for instance, Slice went from 82% down to 55%) and to spread their required expenditures on Canadian content across their various holdings. The policy thus offers large broadcasting entities ‘flexible’ accounting so that they may
count expenditures made on one service against the programming expenditure requirements of another. In this way, they can buy lucrative international formats and shows for their conventional broadcast channels and make cheaper programming for their specialty channels but count their expenditures as an aggregate across holdings. The outcome of this policy is that it allows Canadian broadcasters to afford the considerable licensing costs of international formats – proven winners guaranteed to appeal to advertisers because of the large audiences they can bring in. Produced in Canada according to rules imported from abroad, these shows count as part of a broadcaster’s Canadian content production. An efflorescence of shows after 2011 has seen Canadian format shows such as *Amazing Race Canada* (2013–), *Big Brother Canada* (2013–), *Top Chef Canada* (2011–) and *Storage Wars Canada* (2013–), consistently achieving the highest national ratings.

One independent producer in our study summarized this history:

There was a time – I’ve been working in TV for a long time – when if you had to put X number of hours in as a specialty channel, you had to put X number of hours of original Canadian programming on the air. In the early years it was really just the cost of doing business because then you could buy your American shows and get all your money and ratings from them. And just dump the Canadian shows wherever. Those days are kind of gone now. The funding is the same but the way the networks look at their cost benefits, they don’t just put a show on for the sake of putting it on and shove it in a dead time slot the way they used to do that. That’s not done anymore. If a show is not delivering, it will get cancelled.

(Independent television producer)

The 1999 shift (implemented in 2000) to which this producer is alluding saw a new emphasis on showcasing Canadian content in prime time and therefore was an attempt to reach the large audiences that might attract advertisers. One way to do this was to expand the categories of priority programming. Notably, long-form documentary was included for the first time in 1999, defined as ‘an original non-fiction work at least 30 minutes in length, designed to inform and provide analysis of a subject or point of view’ (CRTC 1999, par. 34). At the same time, dramatic production was granted a 150 per cent time credit, to acknowledge the greater commitment required to produce it (CRTC 1999 par. 56). However, by that time, both documentary and drama were already being combined into reality television’s new hybrids (Dovey 2000).

In 1998 to 1999, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, *Survivor* and *Big Brother* were all launched and became the first highly sought after ‘mega formats’ (Moran 2013: 10). In Canada, the arrival of the so-called ‘shiny floor’ game show formats – often one generation behind Canadian distribution of the American versions (Quail 2015) – has produced a good deal of excitement. *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire: Canadian Edition*, had a short run in 2000 and *Deal or No Deal* came to Canada in 2007 (Wagman 2013). *So You Think You Can Dance Canada* (2008–2011) was the highest rated show in Canada in the first month it was aired and continued with strong ratings until the end of its run (Boyd 2012: 262). In terms of other mega formats, *Big Brother Canada* did not launch until 2013, well after the first spate of formats was made, and then rocketed to the top of the ratings.

Albert Moran argues that the popularity of these global formats in various national contexts is indicative not of the flattening of global culture but,
rather, ‘the continued relevance of the national’ (Moran 2009b: 52). He writes: ‘in the emerging mix of broadcast and post-broadcast television, the national look and feel of many programs appear to be as important as ever’ (Moran 2009b: 42). Arguably, the particular national contexts act as ‘engines of difference’ that give life and variety to fairly simple formulas (Oren and Shahaf 2012: 13). In effect, the success of the formats is predicated on globalization itself, the manufacture and exploitation of difference in a global marketplace (Oren and Shahaf 2012: 14).

Although Canada has always been a consumer of imported or ‘canned’ programmes, the slower uptake of international formats can be attributed to several factors, from the pre-emptively high cost of rights to lack of workforce experience in that type of production. As one producer who had come from the United Kingdom noted, prior to 2000 the strength in the Toronto television industry was in drama, a category that, along with news, was previously thought to be the most important for fulfilling the mandate of Canadian content. This meant that Canadians did not have considerable expertise in reality formats; for instance, the CBC did not begin programming in that area until 2006, well behind public broadcasters in other countries (Foster 2009). Indeed, after 1999, the unions representing Canadian audio-visual workers campaigned vigorously against the reduction of dramatic programming requirement (Coles 2006: 520).

Format scholars have valuably reminded those studying television that there is nothing new about the global movement of media content (Chalaby 2012; Moran 2013). Nevertheless, in the interest of finding historical continuity one can risk negating significant differences. While programme ideas have long been exchanged with varying degrees of formality between countries such as Britain, the United States, Australia and Canada and, indeed, genre itself is one such example of cultural diffusion and reinvention, formats have brought about a significant difference to Canadian television. Canada’s long search for programming that balanced popularity with the values espoused by the national Broadcast Act for the formation of a democratic polity with regional representation and diverse voices is very different from the current situation where Canadians appear as cast members in well-known television brands. Despite the fact that the Broadcast Act has yet to succeed in bringing about the distinctive national culture it allegedly strives for, the turn to formats in a small national market means a direct reduction in what else can be produced (see Hjort and Petrie 2007; Iosifidis 2007). In addition, the adoption of digital television protocols in the first decade of the twenty-first century, a huge expenditure on infrastructure that was disproportionately borne by the public broadcaster, has meant the elimination of many small, regional broadcasting transmitters and with them local forms of news and other programming (Bonin 2010: 145; Taylor 2013: 317). The intensity and dominance of the circulation of global formats is something quite new that combines ‘localization and standardization’ in novel ways (Oren and Shahaf 2012: 3) and, when paired with the concurrent funding cutbacks to the public broadcaster and the adoption of digital technologies, has made an enormous difference to what is being specifically made for Canadian television.

Indeed, since the shift in regulation that assumes larger players with deeper pockets, broadcasters have changed tack. Where for decades, Canadian broadcasters expected to lose money on their Canadian productions, increasingly, the new managerial approach insists on monetizing all content with advertising dollars. As one network executive in our study put it: ‘businesses
2. The majority of Canadian formats are produced by a handful of Toronto firms: Insight Productions, Temple Street Productions, Cineflix, Paperny Films and Force Four Entertainment (Quail 2015).

are saying, “we are television, we are a business first and we need to make money. And we make money by showing off our ratings to our advertisers”. It is very clear, business comes first’ (senior network executive at a private broadcaster). This has meant that there is less leeway for Canadian producers to pitch and produce shows for the Canadian market, and the broadcasters have taken more control of the Canadian content they are broadcasting, aiming for larger viewing numbers above any other factor. While it may seem strange to advocate for unprofitable production, it reflects the shift between two models reliant upon international content, but in different ways. In the first model adopted by the Canadian broadcast system, popular canned American content subsidized the production of original Canadian work. In the current model, by contrast, foreign formats are adapted with Canadian elements to become Canadian content, taking the lion’s share of funding for Canadian production. Thus international formats take up space formerly occupied by original Canadian programming.2

Another important implication of this shift is for cultural labour. The earlier Canadian content model was predicated on fostering above-the-line expertise and exposure. The CAVCO system that certifies productions as ‘Canadian’ in order to be eligible for funding from the Canadian Media Fund assesses projects entirely on the citizenship status of people in the most high profile positions, including screenwriter, director, lead performers, director of photography, art director, composer, and editor (Coles 2006: 523). The newer model, however, sees broadcasting primarily as an industry and favours below-the-line workers rather than marquee names, although increasing competition between jurisdictions for foreign production and fluctuations in the Canadian dollar have jeopardized the establishment of secure working conditions in the sector (Coles 2010: 115). In that sense, formats replace a somewhat essentialist emphasis on the Canadian-ness of the ideas, locations or performers with a purely industrial model of adaptation to a local market.

A side effect of this approach has been that Canadian-owned production companies have begun to orient themselves towards operating in a global marketplace as well (Tinic 2005). If they obtain a contract with a Canadian broadcaster, they will be able to access the tax credits available to support Canadian production; subsequently they will be free to market their show (to which they, and not the broadcaster, maintain the rights) to foreign broadcasters. One direct result of this policy has been a tendency to de-emphasize cultural specificity in shows for ease of international distribution: reality television and science fiction have been the most successful formats (Baltruschat 2010). This is the opposite of the successful export strategy pursued by Danish drama based on cultural and linguistic specificity discussed elsewhere in this issue by Jensen, Nielsen and Waade. It is no wonder that this policy to reduce the obligations of broadcasters to independent producers was opposed by numerous groups representing the sector in Canada, such as the Canadian Media Production Association, the Documentary Organization of Canada, the Canadian Association of Film Distributors and Exporters, and Ontario Media Development Corporation, all of whom saw clearly that it would allow broadcasters to cut back the amount of material produced by independents.

THE BUSINESS OF TELEVISION

This concentration of resources being used to import marketable formats means that often little is left over for independent production and new ideas.
From an independent producer’s point of view, this leaves fewer resources to go around:

If a broadcaster only has a pot this big of money and all of a sudden they do *Big Brother* and they are paying however many millions that costs, it gets them the ratings. Look, we understand that, good for them, it makes total sense. But it leaves a much smaller pot for the rest of us independent producers. So, in our mind, there are less shows happening but they are bigger, more expensive shows. And if you are not a production company who’s getting one of those big expensive shows, you’re fighting for scraps.

(Independent television producer)

A network executive we spoke with corroborated this point: ‘what I have seen is that smaller production companies that are relying on one or two shows are struggling. They are not able to keep the momentum up because the demands from the networks are much more critical’.

Avoiding both the quality debate (Foster 2012) and the determination about the Canadian-ness of formats, the reality is that this type of programming marshals a disproportionate share of the available broadcasting resources. One network executive described the situation of trying to balance Canadian content with appealing international formats as follows:

Also having some of these really highly successful formats, that we can do a Canadian version of that we feel is really Canadian. […] *Top Chef Canada* is very Canadian. It is very much about Canadian ingredients, all of our chefs are Canadian, and all of our stars are Canadian. We tell Canadian stories throughout it. So it’s definitely an international format, it is a US format but it has a really Canadian point of view. […] They get big numbers, which is great for all of us, and they employ a lot of Canadian production teams. You know, when we get a big show like *Big Brother*, I mean that was a huge production and it created a lot of jobs as well. I mean, on a purely economic basis. And it helped lift the numbers for our channel so that we can commission more original shows as well. It is good for business.

(Senior network executive at a private broadcaster)

Clearly, in this perspective, television is seen primarily as an enterprise that can employ more or less people and draw larger or smaller audiences. Its bottom line is the production of profit. Respondents we spoke to repeatedly mentioned the goal of finding the ‘golden egg’ or the ‘golden nugget’. They were all aiming to hit the jackpot, and achieve higher viewing numbers, whether through format-type ‘event programming’, creating a successful entertainment brand that could be sold abroad, or striking upon the elusive elements of a hit.

While, previously, finding an international market for the occasional drama, such as *Degrassi* (2001), or comedy, such as *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007–2012), was an added bonus, today broadcasters and producers alike are striving from the outset to create brandable formats that can be sold abroad, although they will settle for canned exports. At the time of the gathering of interview data, *Recipes to Riches* (2011–) and *Love It or List It* (2008–) were repeatedly mentioned by respondents as Canadian shows that had been turned into successful formats. But keeping an eye on international sales has an effect at
the conceptual level. As one producer put it, ‘to be honest the American audience doesn’t, they don’t particularly like seeing Canadians on TV. They want to see Americans. So, for American broadcasters we tend to shoot in the States’. This is increasingly true for Canadian shows as well. Property Brothers (2011–) and Property Virgins (2006–), both Canadian shows that distribute to the United States, have been filming in US cities in recent years due to the inflated value of the Canadian real estate market when compared to the American one.

Others echoed the view that they were producing with an eye towards the American market, which had an effect on what they were interested in representing:

[… so if we spend all day long talking about Edmonton and Regina and St. John’s, we then try to sell that show to the United States. And all of the Middle Americans go, ‘what the hell is an Edmonton? I don’t even know what that is’. And we could potentially lose that sale because an American broadcaster may say, ‘too specifically Canadian. My audience won’t like it’. If we are generic, east coast, west coast, you know, Middle America kind of thing, they go for that.

(Principal and senior producer at a mid-size independent production company)

Another summed up the contradictions as an attempt to balance commitments to the Broadcasting Act with a drive to obtain sales:

We have to consciously serve Canadians and reflect Canadian stories to a Canadian audience while not alienating an American audience because that is your biggest sale on the planet. That is the country that pays the most money to buy the show, so you would be nuts to completely alienate them. Or you have to do it in such a conscious way that you know you will just never get that sale.

(Senior producer at an independent production company)

Said a third:

You would never, I don’t think you would ever try to create something that didn’t have some kind of a universal appeal, or close the door on something on purpose that might ostracize a city or a country just because you wanted to grow an idea. I think we all try to grow things as universal and as sellable as possible.

(Senior network executive at a commercial broadcaster)

This approach to production with an eye towards international sales means that there is a concerted effort made to obscure the places where the shows are filmed (usually Toronto). Said one producer:

 […] you don’t show the CN Tower, you don’t show a maple leaf, you don’t show a TTC [Toronto Transit Commission] streetcar. […] We always remove any particular detail because the idea is that you should be able to watch that show in like New Mexico, or Alaska, or Hawaii, or Toronto, or Winnipeg and not really think, ‘nah, these Toronto guys’.

(Principal and senior producer at a mid-sized independent production company)
This masking of actual location, or place, is already a well-established aspect of Canadian media history, which has a long tradition of providing generic locations for international productions (Gasher 2002; Matheson 2010). And, although the Broadcasting Act insists on the importance of regional representation, the economics of the Canadian television industry means that in fact most English-language production takes place in Toronto and most French-language production takes place in Montreal (VanderBurgh 2008). One network executive discussed this centralization of production in terms of the cost of locations:

You know, I think the thing is the cheapest place for our productions to shoot usually is in Toronto or in Vancouver – in a city where they’re based. As soon as you start driving that adds money. So as much as we don’t want to be as Toronto-centric as we are. […] We try our best to be generic […]

(Senior network executive at a commercial broadcaster)

Paradoxically, this move to produce generic locations for domestic consumption has had a salutary effect when exporting to other countries, particularly the United States. As one producer pointed out, American specialty channels are already full of Canadian productions that are masking their origins:

If you look at the top shows on HGTV US, consistently for the last ten years they are Canadian productions […] But nobody flaunts that because we don’t want the American audience getting upset that they’re not watching American programming. So we just never say where we are.

(Principal and senior producer at a mid-sized independent production company)

In addition, American broadcasters are taking advantage of the Canadian regulations and the fact that Canadians are producing for the international market to initiate co-productions. According to one network executive:

Right now we are seeing a phenomenon of American producers coming to Canadians and saying, would you like to co-produce a show. Because, for us … if there is an American partner helping pay for the production, you can get a better product. You can get, you know, more money going into something [and it] can look better.

(Contract senior network executive at a private broadcaster)

In sum, the de-regulation of Canadian broadcasting, or its re-regulation, has allowed for the takeover of the expanded television dial of the 1990s by telecommunications companies in the 2000s. The Canadian state, following neo-liberal global protocols on both privatization of broadcast television and the introduction of digital signals, paved the way for the strengthening of the business of broadcasting, often at the expense of any of the other social and political values traditionally associated with a national broadcasting system. The end result is an enormous amount of consolidation combined with the dominance of national versions of ‘shiny floor’ and other format shows, as well as numerous Canadian shows made with an eye towards export.

All of this has taken place at the same time as the transition to ‘post-broadcast’ television: the rise of Internet distribution and, in particular,
As this article is going to press, the CRTC has released a new television policy more suited to an increasingly on-demand television system. ‘Over the next several years, Canadians will continue to migrate from scheduled television and packaged programming services to a more on-demand and tailored television environment. Canadians will seek even greater control over the programmes they watch and will access video programmes on an even wider array of devices. This new environment will require a concerted effort by all players in the broadcasting system, including governments and the Commission, to find new and innovative approaches to support the creation of compelling and diverse programming’ (CRTC 2015: n.p.). Time will tell how this new approach will affect the prevalence of formats on Canadian screens.

The production study component of this research confirmed the success of the de-regulation of the Canadian television industry in promoting a vision of television as an entertainment commodity destined for both national and international marketplaces.

While appeals to the authenticity and national singularity of Canadian culture are themselves selective and debatable, and Canada’s long tradition of integration into global broadcasting needs to be taken into account, it is worth noting the radical changes that have taken place in only a couple of decades. Canadian television today is fully integrated into the formats marketplace – both creating and adapting them – as a means to attract larger audience numbers. Canada has seemingly succeeded in creating an integrated broadcasting and telecommunication industrial sector whose aim is to monetize content across various platforms in this quickly changing industry. The fact that it has done so under the general rubric of Canadian content – while effectively hollowing out opportunities for the independent production sector – demonstrates both the inherent flexibility of the category and the internal contradictions of the Canadian broadcast system.

CONCLUSIONS

Canadian television has gone through major philosophical and technical changes over the past two decades, changes that have dramatically expanded the scope of Canadian broadcasting, while at the same time reducing and consolidating the number of companies controlling the airwaves. Speaking with people in the industry who have lived through these changes showed us the degree to which they have adapted to the installation of a global market into their work. Often this is achieved through following the wisdom spread at international television conferences, such as MIP and MIP Formats, as well national forums such as the Banff World Media Festival (Moran 2009: 34; Quail 2015).

We also saw the extent to which Canadian producers and broadcasters are attuned to the American market, whether as a place to sell their products or as a leader in determining television trends. (Despite the presence of a significant media production labour force from the United Kingdom, there is apparently very little focus on selling shows there.) It was very clear that broadcasters are calling the shots and independent producers must hustle to constantly pitch ideas that are only slightly different from existing successful shows, with the hopes of having their concept picked up for development. The objective for many of the independent producers we met with was to create a reality show that might be produced in Canada and then have a second life as an export abroad, either as a show in syndication or as a format. The fact that it has done so under the general rubric of Canadian content – while effectively hollowing out opportunities for the independent production sector – demonstrates both the inherent flexibility of the category and the internal contradictions of the Canadian broadcast system.
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SUGGESTED CITATION


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In her work, Zoë Druick (Associate Professor, School of Communication, Simon Fraser University) investigates the history and politics of documentary, reality-based and educational media. Her most recent books are the co-edited collections Cinephemera: Archives, Ephemeral Cinema and New Screen Histories in Canada (McGill-Queen’s 2014) and The Grierson Effect: Tracing Documentary’s International Movement (BFI/Palgrave 2014).

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Scene is dedicated to a critical examination of space and scenic production. Central to this journal is the understanding that the designer's contribution to a production involves much more than providing a visual background. Scene welcomes new critical frameworks for the scholarship of creating a scene and invites contributions which explore all aspects of design contexts for live and recorded performance – particularly those which pay attention to the shaping of artistic vision, aesthetic sophistication, critical thinking and craft.

Submissions
Articles, interviews, visual essays, reports from conferences and festivals are welcome from scholars and practitioners. Contributors are encouraged to approach design for entertainment from any discipline and to turn their attention to practices from all countries and in all languages.

For more details, please see the journal’s webpage or contact the editors.

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