

Quebec's new television in the internet revolution

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Abstract

Nowadays, various studies or analyses predict the end of television. What are the causes? The digital revolution, the development of the internet, the proliferation of broadcasting and audiovisual platforms, the availability of new production and broadcasting tools, the discrediting of traditional financing models, the transformation of consumer habits regarding cultural products, etc. The author analyses the evolution of television in Quebec, taking into account technical, economical, and social transformations in the media: a third-generation television, the new face of instant information and culture.

In conclusion, we could say that this is a question of "personal" television which allows people to exist in the media.

Key words

Television, Quebec, internet, multi-broadcasting, convergence, instant culture.

Resum

En l'actualitat, podem trobar diferents estudis o anàlisis que auguren el final de la televisió. Quines en són les causes? La revolució digital, el desenvolupament d'internet, la proliferació de les plataformes de difusió i les plataformes audiovisuals, la disponibilitat de noves eines per a la producció i la difusió, el descrèdit dels models tradicionals de finançament, la transformació dels hàbits dels consumidors respecte dels productes culturals, etc. L'autor analitza l'evolució de la televisió al Quebec, tenint en compte les transformacions tècniques, econòmiques i socials dels mitjans de comunicació: una televisió de tercera generació, la nova cara de la informació i la cultura de la instantaneïtat.

En conclusió, podríem dir que es tracta d'una televisió "personal" que permet a les persones existir als mitjans de comunicació.

Paraules clau

Televisió, el Quebec, internet, multidifusió, convergència, cultura de la instantaneïtat.

Have we reached the end of television,² or only its implosion, as some people have claimed?³ Currently, reports on this issue are not positive, at least regarding general interest television. Television audiences have always been protected in Quebec because of the specific nature of the language (some seven million French speakers in a sea of three hundred million English speakers), and because of the specific nature of its Franco-Latin culture and the originality of its media creation, etc. But things might change.

An amazing paradox! Television is losing its audience but the public has never seen so many electronic images – on the internet, on their mobile phones, on videogames, on the subway, on the walls of their homes, in their neighbourhood... It's also important to stress that some programmes still enjoy enviable success, such as sports (the Football World Cup, American football, the Roland Garros tournament, the *Tour de France*, the *Giro* in Italy and the *Vuelta* in Spain, Canadian hockey), reality shows and popular series such as *Lost*, *Six Feet Under* or *Sex in the City*. Various alternative media such

as YouTube and blogs replace, by 80%, the content of the so-called traditional media. It's as if the public has never seen so many images produced by television, but **away from the small screen...**

But most media analysts still believe that the traditional media — especially general interest television — are doomed in the medium term. As the North American author Bob Garfield⁴ claims, "after records, newspapers and magazines, before books and the radio, television as we know it will disappear. The music industry has been the first to suffer because of iPod and MP3 files. Newspapers are in the eye of the storm now and are suffering greatly". Then, on the list of victims, comes magazines and, behind them, radio. In America, television viewers have decreased annually by 2% for the last ten years and advertising revenue on the main American channels has fallen by 15% this year".

What are the causes of this disaster? Everyone has their own theory, but all arrive at the same conclusions:

- The **digital revolution** allows the translation of all data into

a standard format, be they images, videos or films, sounds, texts and software, and makes it possible to process, combine, update and transmit all information at a lower cost and higher speed.

- The development of the internet, with its false free culture, allows everyone to share new media products, which leads to us witnessing a **globalisation of cultural industries**. Television is fragmented into multiple channels – 100, 200 or 300 – and, because of globalisation, each country brings its own share of channels to the grand banquet of images. To my knowledge, there are over 300 channels in the Middle East. How many general, local, themed, religious, sporting and film channels are offered on cable and satellite networks in the United States? Certainly more than 500. In Quebec, television viewers who subscribe to a cable or satellite system can access 100 different programmes, apart from radio broadcasts and video on demand.

- The multiplication of broadcasting platforms: the proliferation of audiovisual viewing platforms (television screens, PCs, mobile telephones, DVDs, iPods and iPads) and access to unregulated broadcasters (YouTube, Blogosphere, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) suggests that television content will migrate away from the small screen.

- The availability of new, miniature and easy-to-use production gadgets (video cameras, mobile telephones with cameras, editing software), publication tools (YouTube, MySpace, Flickr, Twitter, Blogosphere) and word and image audiovisual processing has enabled a certain degree of democratisation of production methods. Increasingly, young people know how to produce audiovisual content for their own purposes or distribution amongst friends, interest groups or for wider broadcasting.

- Since the advent of the internet, the technical ease of piracy has spread the **false free culture**. We may think that the traditional economic model of television is no longer valid, given the fragmentation of advertising in a world in which there are plenty of specialist television channels and radio stations, and, most importantly, the shift of an ever-increasing part of this range towards the internet and the loss of advertising revenue when going from one medium to another.⁵ On the other hand, what further diminishes the general television audience is the proliferation and popularity of channels (sports, news, films, culture, cookery, etc., on cable or satellite), which do not have the costs of general programming, with public service obligations.⁶

- The change in consumer habits of cultural products means that television viewers have the freedom to choose (the public no longer has to depend on a network, a schedule or a format) and they want to participate in the production of messages (public journalism, self-production, participative internet, social media). If a young person, aged 10 to 25, is a 'telenaut',⁷ they are someone who navigates between television, the internet and videogames. If they are older they can probably afford a large, high-definition digital screen to watch reruns of films or series like *Fortier*, *Desperate Housewives* or *Lost*. In reality,

telenauts always watch television, but in a distracted manner, while talking to friends, answering emails or playing *Sims 2* (if a girl) or, if a competitive boy, and into the latest crazes, he plays *World of Warcraft*, a multi-player game online. Television programmes are too slow for him, he wants to be proactive. It must be said: television has become a secondary medium; the computer, with its many facilities for expression, communication and production, takes pride of place.

In summary, as Olivier Ezratty⁸ says: television is the last step in media that is passing through the sieve of digital convergence. And yet we are already halfway there. Television is becoming multiform: from low resolution on mobiles to PCs, to high definition on large screens; from the big channels to amateur television to YouTube; from family television to personalised television you can watch anywhere, on any object, as well as the multiple input channels (cable, satellite, terrestrial, internet) and output (Wi-Fi, PC, mobiles, screens, internet). Consumers receive a veritable avalanche of free and pay-per-view programmes.

The necessary adaptation of today's television

The media are trying, intermittently, to adapt themselves to the digital world in which business models that have helped them to develop are no longer sustainable. Although, in these times of recession, the economic viability of different products offered to the public is surprising, this should not overshadow the fundamental debate: generalist television continues to be, by a long shot, the main producer of audiovisual content. But as the saying goes, we mustn't throw out the baby with the bathwater! What can we replace television with, since it's the main production source for media content, such as the newspapers, which provide us with largely original information? Generally, all the social networks are parasites that happily plagiarise what newspapers or television produce; in fact, they react to events, rather than inform or explain.⁹ This is evident with Twitter, which is a "great sounding box" of daily rumours, currently known as *buzz*.¹⁰

Everyone talks about headlines and reports in the press and on television, morning to night, and we all refer to images we have seen on television, especially on generalist television. As is shown by an American study carried out by the PEW Foundation, 80% of what is on YouTube has been copied from television broadcasts: new television content available on the internet, such as web-series,¹¹ is only profitable if they are bought by the large networks.

How does Radio Canada manage?:

1. Multi-broadcasting solution: images migrate from the small screen to a variety of supports, travelling through networks in new formats (web-series), through the internet or 3G telephone (such as iPod and iPad) or recorded on DVD. If television literally implodes, and increasingly loses its audiences, it bursts, on the other hand spreading images in our environ-

ment: this is its tragedy in the economic territory. The solution: to implement multimedia strategies in the respective media groups, which will help them recuperate all the production benefits by products being reproduced on television, radio, newspapers and magazines, on the internet, telephone, etc. Radio Canada¹² is improving its integration in three areas: television, radio and the internet.

2. The benefits of convergence: TVA, the private generalist Francophone channel, has created a powerful media group called the Québecor group: general and themed television, distributed by cable, telephone (fixed and mobile), news websites, newspapers, magazines, etc. According to the group's president, Pierre-Karl Péladeau: "Convergence is essentially a term used to describe a process which is used in all industries: integration. The term *convergence* has been in vogue for the past two years. Before, we spoke of synergy. It's the same."¹³ "In the past, we defended concentration; now it's time to integrate. Different times mean different ways. Content circulates from one medium to another... and the profits follow! It's the miracle recipe of reality television, which is financed by reuniting various media around the small screen, such as the internet, mobile phone, blogs, etc., and it knows, moreover, how to exploit its windows of opportunity, capitalising on the investment of the media empire which produces it: revenue that comes from websites, voting via the mobile network or cable subscriptions, from newspaper and magazine coverage, from the sale of products (records, CDs, shows, adverts of all kinds), etc.

3. Financial contribution of distributors: nowadays, in Canada, cable suppliers (cable and satellite companies) invest part of their clients' subscriptions but only for pay channels (\$1 or \$2 per subscriber, per theme, per themed channel). The CRTC¹⁴ has so far refused to do the same for conventional television. Although it will (eventually) allow private networks (TVA, Canwest, Global) to do so, this has not been the case with Radio Canada. Difficult to understand, right? However, the income gap between the generalist and specialist channels is growing ever wider. "According to last week's figures published by CRTC, the income of companies that distribute the signal (by cable or satellite) increased by \$1,100 million from the previous year (2009) to reach \$11,400 million. The profit margin (before tax) is, approximately, 25%, from a total of \$2,300 million in 2009. During the same period, the total income from private channels fell by around 8%, below \$2 million. The reduction in operating costs has not resulted in profits and these companies finally lost \$116 million in 2009."¹⁵

Television nowadays is third generation

To say that television has evolved in the last fifty years is nothing new. In line with Umberto Eco, researchers speak of 'arqueotelevision',¹⁶ 'neotelevision'¹⁷ and 'post-television', or,

in fewer words, of television for grandparents, parents and, nowadays, children.

The beginnings of television (called *director television*) has resulted in the evolution of mindsets and is, undoubtedly, one of the most distinguishing aspects which in Quebec is called *the silent revolution* of the 1960s (which involved the secularisation of society, the creation of a public function and the unionisation of workers, the development of important cultural institutions such as Radio Canada, the resurgence of an independent newspaper such as *Le Devoir* and the sexual revolution), which helped to present the rural world (in a fictitious series that lasted twenty years: *Un homme et son péché*, for example) to city dwellers, and for city dwellers to people living in rural areas (*La plouffe*, another important soap opera);¹⁸ on a linguistic level, it has slowly removed regional accents and peculiarities; on a political scale it has "freed the mouths" (social and working revolution) and the heart (sexual revolution); in cultural terms, it has put the arts, painting and singing under the spotlight. We remember how grandmothers may have been surprised and, still, remain stupefied at seeing soap opera actors and actresses passionately kissing: it was like turning the light on for scenes that only normally happen in the bedroom. What a surprise it was to the people in the community television area of Saint-Félicien, in 1960, when they saw images of their main street on their screens; they not only saw the Eiffel Tower or the White House, they were also part of the world to watch and love; it was like having a mirror in front of them to see...

Above all, television in the 1980s and 1990s was, according to Dominique Mehl's¹⁹ nice turn of phrase, television of intimacy and family life, and allowed for the evolution of customs and the amicable settlement of familiar conflicts. In Janette Bertrand's soap operas (*Quelle famille*, *Grand-papa*) or Lise Payette's (*La bonne aventure*, *Des dames de coeur*, *Les machos*), many dramas have been avoided in relationships between parents and children, men and women, *L'amour avec un grand A*, feminine and feminist revolution, the questioning of religious taboos, homosexuality...

In its third generation, television has a more global perspective in which the problems that are dealt with include drugs, prostitution, marital infidelity, street-gang violence, ethnicity; the objective is more difficult, action is faster, in the style of action cinema: it is *Desperate Housewives* or *Beautés désespérées* (Quebec), *Lost* in the United States or *Perdus* in Quebec, *24*, *Fortier*, etc. But television nowadays is, above all, **television that cares about people**, that tells them how to take care of their health, how they can eat well, how to look after their children, how to live as a couple, how to lose weight, how to save the planet, how to travel. In short, how to be happy. In an era of insecurity, because of climate change, terrorist attacks, pandemics, environmental risks, diseases, traffic accidents, tobacco, alcohol or drug poisoning, television calms and advises. But if we are a little critical, television does two things at the same time: while it creates serenity it also spreads inse-

curity. It fits together all the pieces in the dreaded pandemic flu virus A (H1N1), the farmers in remote areas of Montana in the USA fear an attack by Al-Qaeda, travellers willingly accept physical examinations on planes just in case... Television is the best self-monitoring device that our post-modern society could apply.

The new face of news

Why is there news through the night, which allows people to go to bed after checking on how the planet is doing? Nowadays news is available all hours of the day and night. Paul Cauchon, from *Le Devoir*, believes that the news world is changing: "Is television news still the star programme of Radio Canada? Its content, maybe. Its traditional broadcasting mode, definitely not. Audience levels are not what they used to be (nor VAT)."²⁰ There are increasingly fewer people watching evening news on the television only to "get the headlines". Why? Because news is everywhere, at anytime and anywhere, on large media news websites, which constantly renew their home pages, to the 24-hour news channels that continue to multiply, to news feeds that circulate by computer (known as RSS), to free newspapers given out on the underground, to radios, etc. But this information is fragmented, divided, in sound bites, as flashes.

For example, in the case of sports news, cable channels have recently appeared with **news briefs**: sports results, but, above all, summaries of matches, notable figures, exploits. Contrary to written information, they bring spectacular images, 30-second videos, impressive tackles, fortunate pick-ups, unexpected shots, incredible car accidents — as sports commentators, we are short of superlatives! Nowadays, the audiovisual sector looks for virtual snapshots that the media can repeat automatically and ad nauseam: the images of the Twin Towers crumbling on 11 September 2001 captured by an amateur, the bird covered in oil during the Gulf War, J. F. Kennedy collapsing in his convertible, Zidane's header... Nowadays, there are millions of targets on the lookout for the supreme or sublime moment. We no longer live in the era of direct culture but in an **instantaneous culture**, which summarises an event in a clip, which stigmatises it. The abolition of duration, the idolatry of eternal time, the spectacular staging — this is how we destroy the continuation of things, transforming all events into different facts, into things that happen by chance, this is how man succumbs to image. There are increasingly more broadcasts (often coming from the United States and from police files themselves) that do nothing but show various spectacular events, unbelievable police chases, arrests that have ended badly or strange or unusual events, images of tornados or natural catastrophes.²¹ We see it, we are surprised, we say we are against it and we carry on as normal. Paraphrasing the title of a popular programme, *Drôles de vidéos!* ('Funny videos'), why would that person act like that, what is the context and what were the circumstances that explain the strange behaviour, is

explanation futile? As Jacques Brel said in his song, *Au suivant...*

Obviously, we say that information is interesting when it is new: as professors of communication say to their students, "dog bites man" is not an interesting piece of news, but "man bites dog" is... The problem is the speed images are projected and the amalgamation between different important events and facts, between so-called 'human interest' stories (the famous 'human interest') and the sociological nature of information. Too much information kills information!

Instant culture

The discovery of a new sociability less limited to the local and national environment of a person but also global, is very much inspired by social networks on the internet, mobile phones and online videogames. Online game players (playing things like *World of Warcraft*, *WoW*) used to be considered antisocial or neurotic, like schizophrenic nerds. They might even invent a new way of living, all together, of contacting each other and sharing a way of living, ultimately in a relatively superficial way, with no real commitment. A kind of being there, living for the moment alongside each other: I am, I exist, because I am talking to you, where are you, what are you doing, what's happening, what's new... A kind of social chatter, "small talk"²² as the Anglo-Saxons say, which hides a profound feeling of solitude, the tragic condition of being isolated and without depth, the painful feeling of not being able to delve into something to see the human condition of a human being in its finiteness. This is the message, both serious and terrified, from a journalist of a popular magazine:

"We are too informed. Over-informed? I have nothing against this, but..."

Now, when I sit with a book and I have read four or five pages, I can't help but look at the computer... There are a dozen new messages. It's obvious I am missing something if I don't read them, I feel displaced... "This is what's misleading. When we are not constantly connected to Twitter or Facebook, we have the sensation of being disconnected and we are scared people will say: "You're not with it; you've been away for two hours!"

Have I turned into a cyber-addict? I think and fear that I have..."²³

Through chat, Twitter or Facebook, we promise nothing, only **being there**; we share together, as adolescents, the desire to console ourselves of the world's insecurity, of things that happen, of the universe that we do not understand, of the disease that stalks us, of the death that comes to us...

In conclusion, we could talk at length about **personal television** that allows individuals to exist in the media, the idea of television being like a mirror that reflects the image of what I am or what I want to be... From the beginning of the 1990s

new television shows have appeared based on the speech of so-called "normal" people: reality shows, confessional programmes, TV forums... In France, these programmes are *Vie privée/vie publique*, *Toute une histoire*, amongst others. The precursor to all these is, without doubt, the gossip press, present in newspapers before.

But today people are going further and further: they reveal cases of incest, rape, physical and moral abuse, of parents abandoning their children, lives lived under the influence of drugs, torture in times of war, etc.; all these vices or deviations that used to be kept secret by families, couples or individuals.

It is fashionable to confess or "to come out of the closet". We talk less and less about homosexuality and transsexuality, since coming out of the closet is becoming more and more of a non-event; this behaviour is considered normal and we only show what's surprising or shocking. We are victims or executioners. It is the regime of "show all – see all"? Transparency is not only the whim of politicians... Television is becoming an open confessional that permits the absolution of all sins through the simple act of confessing in public. Television centred on the self, which feeds confusion between the public and private sphere.

Notes

- 1 J.-P. Lafrance is the author of various books, including three works on television: *La télévision à l'ère d'Internet* (Quebec: Septentrion, August 2009); *Le câble ou l'univers médiatique en mutation* (Montreal: Quebec-America, 1989), and *La télévision, un média en crise* (Montreal: Quebec-America, 1982), a chapter in *Presente y futuro de la televisión digital* [Bustamante, E; Álvarez Monzoncillo, J. M. (ed.), Madrid, 1999], as well as various scientific articles: "El fenómeno telenauta o la convergencia televisión/computadora entre los jóvenes". In: *Diálogos*. Lima, 2005; "La televisión y su público, un contrato en proceso de renegociación permanente". In: *TELOS*. Madrid (September–November 1994); "Le paradoxe canadien, expériences de communication participative". In: *Hermès*. Paris, Autumn 2008, reproduced in *Essentiels d'Hermès*, 2010.
- 2 MISSIKA, J. L. *La fin de la télévision*. Paris: Seuil, 2006.
- 3 MORANDINI, J. M. "Télé: l'implosion, enquête sur un naufrage annoncé". In: *L'Archipel*, November 2007.
- 4 GARFIELD, B. "The Chaos Scenario". Stielstra Publishing, August 2009, also published in *Paperback*.
- 5 Certainly, online advertising increases each month for news websites that belong to the public media channels, but is far from offsetting the losses suffered by these media. In response to this situation, television increases the number of adverts, which carries on contributing to its loss in audiences. Like a dog chasing its own tail.
- 6 According to Paul Cauchon, journalist with *Le Devoir*, the audience of the three largest Quebecois television networks - TVA, Radio Canada and V – always decrease from one year to the next. Cossette Media has calculated that, during the last season in 2009, the combined market share of the three main general networks fell by 13%. In an internal document prepared from BBM surveys for winter and spring 2008, TVA's search service has found that, in spring, the general networks had lost 9% of their audience to themed channels. This loss reached 15% amongst viewers aged 25 to 54 years – the advertisers' target audience. Specialist channels have increased their audience by 19%. In fact the global market share of all specialist channels is now around 40%. For example, everyone knows that RDS (the sports-themed channel) reached record audiences with hockey.
- 7 *Telenaut* is an acronym formed by the contraction of **tele**-vision and **inter-nauts**, created in a research paper entitled: "Télénautes et mobiles; analyse des pratiques communicationnelles des adolescents et des jeunes adultes", carried out under the Professorship of Unesco-Bell at the Université du Québec in Montréal by Pierre Brouillard, Magda Fusaro and J.-P. Lafrance. See J.-P. Lafrance, "Les télénautes, les pratiques mixtes de jeunes en télévision et sur Internet". In: *Réseaux*. Paris, 2005.
- 8 See <http://www.oezratty.net/wordpress/wp-content/WindowsLiveWriter/RapportCES2007>, 26 January 2007.
- 9 A study carried out by research institute PEW showed that 9 out of 10 stories presented to social networks came from traditional sources, which shows that these types of networks are repeating information instead of making it; the micro-blogger monitors political news (if they are a journalist) or personal (if they communicate with their many "young" friends). The PEW is a group of American thinkers (a Washington think tank) that analyses the trends and attitudes of North Americans regarding the media, journalism and the internet. The study mentioned, *How News Happens*, centres on the city of Baltimore (11 January 2010).
- 10 But what is this *buzz*? See the French definition in Wikipedia: *buzz* is a marketing technique which consists, as its name indicates, of making noise about a new product or offer. *Buzz* has grown considerably with the appearance of new information and media technologies. In fact, these types of broadcasting allow the multiple propagation of messages, at high rates and low cost. But the genre's limits lie in its chaotic mode of broadcasting, since *buzz* can be a dangerous broadcasting tool. In fact, consumers are the ones who grab messages and, as often happens with rumours, can change them, divert them, ridicule them or destroy them.
- 11 Web series are mini-series (fiction, TV reality and documentary) lasting approximately five minutes and made by young directors, which are broadcast across information websites on the large networks or even on YouTube. Sometimes they are so popular that large television networks buy them (for example, *Les têtes à claques*) or they are even published for free

(such as *Mère indigne*). There are more and more independent producers that make what the LEDEN laboratory at the Université Paris VIII calls "cross-media", in other words, audiovisual products that can be shown on one media or another, from one format to another, from one time to another. In this way, they are preparing new types of production for the internet or multimedia phone. These mini-series are very common in the United States, Quebec and, to a lesser extent, in France.

- 12 Curiously Radio Canada has maintained its original name, from the 1930s, from the era of radio...
- 13 InfoPresse, special 20 years: *Où en est la convergence*, 2007.
- 14 The Conseil de la Radiotélédiffusion Canadienne (CRTC) is a regulatory body that establishes electronic broadcasting standards in Canada. Overall, the CRTC has a very liberal policy, following the example of the Federal Commission of Communications (FCC) in the United States. It permits many licences for the creation of a multitude of specialised channels that compete with each other. So far it has refused to fix the amount of tax for generalist channels that belong to cable networks.
- 15 Stéphane Baillargeon. *Le Devoir*, 23 March 2010.
- 16 Umberto Eco (1985). "TV: la transparence perdue" (1983). In: *La guerre du faux*. Paris: Grasset.
- 17 Casetti, F.; Odin (1990) "De la paleo- à la néo-télévision". In: *Communications*. No. 51, Télévisions/mutations. Paris: Seuil. On the other hand, Ignacio Ramonet spoke of post-television in "Big brother". In: *Le Monde diplomatique*, June 2001.
- 18 For the people of Quebec, soap operas are like Latin American series. They are numerous and cover all sorts of sociocultural issues; even nowadays they continue to form the basis of television programming.
- 19 Mehl, D. *La télévision de l'intimité*. Paris: Seuil, 1996. See also, "La télévision relationnelle". In: *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*. Vol. 112, 2002.
- 20 Paul Cauchon. *Le Devoir*, June 2008.
- 21 The documentary channel Canal D, specialist in the rar-rar genre: *Histoire de crimes*, *Légendes urbaines*, *Faut le voir*, *Images-choc*, *Un tueur si proche*, *Dossiers justice*, *L'étrange*, *Affaires classées*, *Vidéo-patrouille*, etc.
- 22 "How can you be social or have small talk? How can we be social in nature?, or what we could translate as chatter, chat, such as teenagers' communication that never disconnects... Not to be confused with one of the first programming languages aimed at objects and called Smalltalk!
- 23 Geneviève Borne in the magazine *Clin d'oeil*, June 2009.