Breaking News?

Politics, Journalism, and Infotainment on Quebec Television

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Translated by Käthe Roth

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Introduction: A Controversial Marriage

The rise to prominence of shows that combine news and entertainment has been a major trend in television programming since the 1980s. News and politics are no longer the sole prerogative of newscasts and public affairs programs. Political satire abounds, politicians do the talk-show circuit, and journalists and intellectuals who object to such programming and demand more serious news tend to be viewed as impossibly nostalgic and unable to adapt to this different method of political communication.

These journalists and intellectuals have sparked a vigorous debate over the television genre known as infotainment. The Sunday talk show *Tout le monde en parle,*[1] which debuted on Radio-Canada in the fall of 2004, has seen success unparalleled on English Canadian television, and some (e.g., Kelly 2011; Taylor 2011) have suggested that an English adaptation be made. Its infotainment content has certainly drawn many lively reactions.[2] Topics of discussion have included its position on the schedule, a time slot reserved for cultural productions that had belonged to *Les Beaux dimanches* since the mid-1960s; the fact that the program often runs long, pushing back the start time of *Le Téléjournal;* the regular visits by politicians; and the fact that it addresses touchy subjects. The longevity of the program – it was finishing its thirteenth season as I was writing these lines – and its consistently high ratings have given it a special status within the Quebec media universe. Yet it is just one example of a controversial genre. Other infotainment programs –

and those who appear on them – have given rise to much criticism over the years, both in Quebec and elsewhere in Canada.

At least four themes appear repeatedly in this polemical discourse. A first aspect of the controversy concerns the fear that infotainment will take over the airwaves, reducing news to just a small portion of network programming, especially on public broadcasters' schedules. Richard Stursberg's mandate at the head of CBC Television (and then the CBC's radio and web services) was punctuated with contentious choices aimed at broadening the CBC's audience. It was thought that Stursberg favoured comedies, dramas, and soft news over "real" news and current affairs (Whitlock 2012). Rick Mercer's and George Stromboulopoulos's shows premiered during his term. *La Presse* columnist Lysiane Gagnon (2005) had previously made the same criticism regarding the French-language public network: "In order to attract more and more viewers, Radio-Canada systematically dumbs down its content. Ironically, some of its programs are now trashier than the worst private channels ... Welcome to crass TV."

A second aspect concerns the regular appearance of politicians on these "lightweight" programs – a practice that, in the view of some, tends to undermine the credibility of political actors and institutions and weaken the democratic value of political communication. In 2010, during an interview about the cynicism of the electorate, sovereignist politician Lucien Bouchard denounced the practice: "I'll never get used to seeing politicians falling over themselves to appear on variety shows. They're trivializing themselves. Politicians don't belong on those shows" (quoted in Gagnon 2010, A3).[3] Yet, when he was premier of Quebec, Bouchard made a number of such appearances. During the 1998 Quebec election campaign, as a guest on *Le Poing J,* he seemed to be very moved when a friend read some notes that he had written in his diary four years earlier, when Bouchard's leg was amputated. Gagnon (1998) denounced what she saw as "the heights of emotional manipulation" by a politician "willing to exploit to the hilt this tragic episode in his private life."[4] And, during one part of the campaign, Bouchard

refused to participate in any editorial meeting with the print press, arousing the ire of the journalism community (Cauchon 1998b; Corbeil 1998).

A third recurrent critique is the lack of seriousness with which infotainment programs treat certain weighty subjects. In the fall of 2005, psychiatrist Pierre Mailloux – whom Gagnon (2005) called a "clownish psychiatrist" in the *Globe and Mail* – talked about studies explaining why blacks have lower IQs than whites during an appearance on *Tout le monde en parle*. Journalists and community workers chastised Radio-Canada for having broadcast these ideas on a show that favours sound bites over nuances and in-depth debates (Cauchon 2005; Rouleau, Cloutier, and Picard 2005). In the view of Mario Cardinal (2005b), the former ombudsman at Radio-Canada, host Guy A. Lepage had demonstrated that he did not understand the role of the public affairs interviewer.[5]

In the winter of 2006, Radio-Canada launched *Le Fric Show,* which takes a critical look at consumer society. Each week the host, comedian Marc Labrèche, takes to a circus-inspired set to explore a particular sector, highlighting the credulity of consumers, the exploitation of workers, the pollution generated by industrial processes, and so on. The topics covered are documented with data and humorous interviews. Journalist Sophie Cousineau (2006) objected to a lack of impartiality on the program after viewing a controversial episode on the tee-shirt industry. She pointed out the inaccuracy of much of the information and the absence of nuances needed to present the situation properly. "'Don't let the facts interfere with a good story!' say English-language journalists ironically ... Yet this expression perfectly describes *Fric Show,*" she wrote in a piece published on the front page of *La Presse*.

Many journalists criticize politicians' visits to talk shows and the treatment given on these shows to certain current events. Yet journalists themselves sometimes also appear on this kind of program. This is a fourth recurrent theme in the debate on infotainment. Anchor Simon Durivage gave some of his colleagues pause when he hosted a variety show in 1999. One evening, immediately after

finishing his newscast, he was followed by the cameras as he walked over to the set of the talk show *Le Poing J,* where he replaced host Julie Snyder and conducted an interview with Premier Bouchard. Journalists questioned both his ethics and the blurring of criteria on the basis of which the quality of this political interview should be evaluated (Cauchon 1999; Collard 1999; Lagacé 1999). "Should we admonish Simon?" wondered Nathalie Petrowski (1999). At the beginning of the interview, Bouchard openly admitted his anticipation that the interview would unfold differently when his staff presented him with Durivage's invitation: "Well, at first, I thought it was a political interview, and you'd be asking me serious questions. But when they told me that it wouldn't be serious ... Well! That will be easy: it's not serious!" (*Le Poing J,* October 4, 1999).

More commonly, journalists appear on infotainment programs to discuss a subject in the news – an election campaign or a war, for example – or to present a book that they have written. With such critical discourse, journalists thus fashion themselves as advocates of virtuous principles related to democracy, but they also betray their corporatist concerns, for infotainment is a political communication vehicle that competes with journalism. In effect, with their appearances, journalists acknowledge – or help to establish – the legitimacy of infotainment and demonstrate that journalism is inscribed within the sphere of cultural industries.

Corporatist concerns also emerge when figures associated with infotainment try to infiltrate the journalism community. Following the 1998 Quebec election campaign, "journalists" Jean-René Dufort and Patrick Masbourian, from *La Fin du monde est à 7 heures,* applied to join the Fédération professionnelle des journalistes du Québec (FPJQ). The program had aired a report uncovering a flaw in the electoral system that allowed people to vote more than once. That year *La Fin du monde* was the subject of a vigorous debate during the organization's congress. Although the quality and relevance of the program's report were hailed by some, the FPJQ rejected their applications, maintaining that the program on which the applicants worked was a comedy and not within the purview of the news

department of the broadcaster, Télévision Quatre Saisons (TQS) (Cauchon 1998a, 2002; Sarfati 1998).

The proliferation of infotainment programs on network schedules, the presence of politicians on these programs, the way in which they address politics, and the attribution of the status of journalist – or of certain privileges – to the people who make these programs are all topics of heated discussion. But this type of controversy is not new: the crossover between news and entertainment, along with other changes that have transformed communications, is of concern to those who control access to the public space. Communicating with the public is a fundamental need for politicians, and they are open to any new alliance with those likely to relay their messages to a large number of people. And each of these changes further erodes the influence of the existing gatekeepers. Today journalists denounce infotainment, just as they worry about the development of the blogosphere and the attribution to bloggers of certain privileges that had formerly been reserved for them.[6] In another era, print journalists were hostile to competition from radio and then from television. Before that, the partisan press had shuddered at the emergence of news agencies that applied new forms of objectivity. And, even longer ago, religious powers and the monarchy feared the advent of the printing press, which made it possible to propagate vernacular texts to a broader audience that could now read and understand without the assistance of interpreters (Popkin 2006).

If the Trend Continues

There is good reason to denounce the excesses that can arise on infotainment programs and to underline the problems that they pose, but to strive to return to a situation in which all genres are hermetically sealed from each other – if such a division ever existed – is a vain ambition. The combination of news and entertainment is not a new phenomenon. Traces of it can be found in the early years of Canadian television with shows such as *This Hour Has Seven Days*

and *90 Minutes Live* on the CBC and *Les Couche-tard* and *Appelez-moi Lise* on Radio-Canada. (Before starting her political career, Lise Payette hosted a talk show that featured artists, politicians, and other guests of all kinds.) Yet infotainment has grown by leaps and bounds over the past twenty years as new concepts have sprung up combining the typical elements of each in different ways. Alongside talk shows with a variety of guests are breakfast television shows, political satire programs, and innovative concepts (which I will discuss in Chapter 1). This evolution seems to be in the interests of the people who create the new concepts, the broadcasters that want to attract viewers, the viewers who want to be simultaneously informed and amused, the politicians and other figures who want to be seen, and the many journalists who agree to appear.

It is generally accepted that broadcasting has three fundamental missions: to inform, to educate, and to entertain (to which is sometimes added the less lofty mission of selling). As I examine the programming schedules on certain networks in the next chapter, I will observe that news and entertainment are not the only fundamental genres to be combined. "Typical" educational programs, for example, have given way, for the most part, to programs that marry education and entertainment. Furthermore, most viewers are aware that advertising is not restricted to the regulatory number of minutes assigned to it but infringes on programs of all sorts through sponsorships, product placements, and other mechanisms, both subtle and not.

Instead of advocating an unlikely re-establishment of the borders between genres, our time is better spent assessing the contribution of infotainment as carefully as possible and proposing solutions to the problems that it causes.

Challenges for Journalism

My main goal in this book is to gain a better understanding of the merits and limitations of infotainment and of the challenges that it poses. I will contrast the debate that I have outlined above with

analyses resulting from observation of the situation on Canadian television. What will emerge from my research is that the criticism of these programs is excessive.

For example, it is sometimes said that interviews conducted on talk shows allow politicians to highlight a different aspect of personality and that this is to the detriment of the issues facing society. Frequently, "in-depth interviews" – supposedly serious and difficult – conducted by journalists are contrasted with those conducted on talk shows – supposedly light and easy. In Chapter 3, I will analyze the data drawn from almost 100 political interviews conducted on various types of programs. As we will see, certain – though not all – political interviews conducted on talk shows compare favourably with many public affairs programs in terms of the attention paid to issues that concern government action and the rigour of the questions asked. Of course, this is not always the case. Similarly, not all newsroom reports are examples of journalistic excellence. But when we systematically compare these two types of television production, the gaps observed are not always the ones that we expect.

In Chapter 4, I will show that effective use of infotainment, which politicians use as a tactical tool to achieve their strategic objectives, depends on a number of prerequisites. Ask Stéphane Dion about that! When he was leader of the Liberal Party of Canada, he talked about his reasons for participating in such programs – and his reluctance to do so – as few sitting politicians have done. For some, it is much simpler and more reassuring to sit facing the anchor of a newscast than to walk down the stairs to the set of a talk show such as *Tout le monde en parle*.

The alarm that polemicists raise about these programs seems to me to be disproportionate. Many fear that infotainment feeds disinformation, cynicism, and disengagement. Yet, for more than half a century, studies of how the news media are received have shown that they have a relatively limited influence on people. The impact of the media is often much more complex and indirect than we think, for the reception of ideas is mediated by social and

psychological factors that circumscribe their power. When we examine infotainment programs, we find, contrary to what many critics fear, that they make a positive contribution to democratic life by piquing the audience's interest in public affairs and motivating people to pay more attention to political news.

Like other forms of news communication that have sprung up in recent years, infotainment offers a challenge to journalism, that of affirming its specificity more clearly by relying on the values that form the basis of its social legitimacy in democratic societies. It seems to me that journalists have little to gain by withdrawing into corporatism in the hope of protecting privileges and territories. Of course, television is a cultural industry in which there is strong pressure to maximize profits, and we must therefore expect that broadcasters will increasingly be called on to contribute to the success of their owners' other commercial properties. The strength of journalism in the face of competing news discourses such as infotainment will no doubt reside in its capacity to accomplish its democratic function by creating a space for freedom of action within cultural industries. Journalists must distinguish themselves by working harder to expose facts and explain complex issues.

The space needed to accomplish these functions requires not just financial resources but also airtime. On some networks, news almost exclusively takes the form of newscasts that are aired more often and take up bigger time blocks but paced so quickly that the explanations and analyses that allow journalism to stand out are limited. Radio-Canada's *Le Point* has been absorbed into *Le Téléjournal,* just as CBC's *The Magazine* (formerly *The Journal*) was absorbed into *The National* in the early 2000s. TVA – the most-watched private network in Quebec – no longer airs a single public affairs program during prime time. Even Réseau de l'information (RDI), which broadcasts news twenty-four hours a day, has sacrificed the daily hour during which Pierre Maisonneuve, and then Bernard Drainville, took an in-depth look at a single subject for a faster-paced program recapping the day's news in one hour, *24 heures en 60 minutes.*[7]

The Unbearable Freedom of the Genre

Although infotainment is probably not the horrific tumour that some would like to see excised to save the life of democracy, it nevertheless poses an ethical problem. Which rules should govern the production of these programs and how they process the news? Part of the continuing debate can be explained by the impression that no rules exist and that such free-for-alls can lead only to the worst excesses. Some hosts have taken it upon themselves to claim virtually unfettered freedom on the ground that their programs are not news.

A mixture of news and entertainment necessarily implies that there is some news there. Yet the broadcasting of news is a social activity that generates potential for conflict because of the political, economic, social, legal, and cultural issues that arise. When infotainment programs were few and far between, this issue could be swept under the rug. Their rise to prominence has no doubt contributed to the potential for conflict that they harbour. It is similar for programs that fall fully under the rubric of entertainment but might address controversial subjects related to public affairs, such as Don Cherry's comments on *Hockey Night in Canada*. I will give a few examples of this in Chapter 6. As these conflicts arise because of the actions of various people, conventions, more or less formalized, will have to be negotiated to reduce the risk of conflict.

Could we not save ourselves such rules by simply appealing to the good judgment of viewers, who should be capable of differentiating between seriousness and humour? In an ideal world perhaps, in reality probably not, for the cross-pollination among genres is so advanced that those involved in producing these programs sometimes don't agree among themselves on the nature of what they're doing. The public interest requires that the rules be clear and that effective mechanisms control, to some extent, the quality of the news conveyed by these programs. Infotainment should not be a wild west in which anything goes under the convenient pretext of entertainment.

The constant refinement of the mixture of news and entertainment becomes clear when we examine the evolution of the phenomenon over time. When did its earliest manifestations appear? Has the phenomenon grown? How have commercial television and intensification of competition contributed to it?