

Researching Television History: Prime-Time Canada, 1952-1967

by **PAUL RUTHERFORD***

Television came to Canada in one great hurry. In 1951, only 43,000 households, a mere 1 per cent of the total, had a television set.¹ After the introduction of Canadian television late in 1952, a buying craze started in the cities of central Canada which soon spread throughout the nation, paralleling the expansion of the service and its coverage. By 1961, 3,757,000 households, or 83 per cent of the total, had TV. Indeed, more homes had a television set than a flush toilet, bath, or shower!² Viewing statistics show that the TV was one of the most used appliances: in February 1959, on any given day, nine out of ten households had a television on at some point during the daytime or evening. Most of the viewing took place in the evening, especially between 8:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M. when about 80 per cent of these households were tuned in.³ That made prime-time viewing the most widely shared cultural experience of the vast majority of Canadians.

This article investigates the prime-time phenomenon from its origins in the early 1950s to its maturity in the late 1960s. This grand story mixes a number of distinct tales. First, it raises a question about whether this era was, in truth, a “golden age” when television’s novelty fostered an innovative art form that maturity would later stultify with formulas and conventions. The story includes the noble experiment of a national television service (public and private, francophone and anglophone) which strove to supply viewers with a Canadian brand of entertainment and affairs. And that brings us to the villain of the piece, Hollywood, whose expanding television empire after the mid-1950s seemingly reinforced the Americanization of the country, at least in the realm of the popular arts. But most interesting is the question of television and change; in other words, what was the impact of this novel medium on the making of modern Canada? How can these tales be linked? This article focuses on television’s public; it begins “a viewers’ history” of the prime-time phenomenon. I should add that the research will not be completed for some years yet.

* Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the Convention of the Popular Culture Association in Toronto on 30 March 1984 and to the Association of Canadian Archivists Annual Meeting in Toronto on 23 May 1984.

1 International Surveys Ltd., *Seasonal Listening and Viewing Habits in Canada and Its 3 Major Markets*, 1958-59, p. 78.

2 *Census of Canada, 1961, vol. II, part 2, Housing Characteristics*, Table 93, p. 93-1.

3 International Surveys, *Seasonal Listening*, pp. 24, 26, 28.

What follows is an abbreviated description of the research project, the struggles with the records, and some of the findings. It will be a practical demonstration of one historian at work.

Researching any topic in broadcasting poses problems because the normal tools and raw materials of the historical trade will not suffice. A few years ago, Asa Briggs, the noted chronicler of British broadcasting, pointed out that the historian of radio or television must contend with a "huge bulk of output and [with] its ephemeral nature."⁴ The novelty of "a viewer's history," moreover, has led me to employ methodologies of research and analysis still somewhat unusual in historical circles. In particular, I have shamelessly stolen approaches, strategies, and concepts from the sociology of mass communication and the exotic discipline of semiotics.⁵ A further continuing problem has been locating the data. There is a wealth of American material about everything from networks and situation comedies to programmers. But the story of television in Canada is a frontier of history; apart from Frank Peers' *The Public Eye* and some French-Canadian works,⁶ there are no major monographs or compendia to rely upon. It is my impression that the archival situation has improved enormously since John Twomey prepared his extensive survey of broadcasting resources in English Canada in 1978.⁷ Still, there is a crying need for some comprehensive listing of what is available, where it can be found, and how it can be used to guide the hapless researcher. Much effort has gone into making contact with people in libraries, archives, and corporations, many of whom were puzzled by my requests if not suspicious of my intentions. Naturally, the personnel of university libraries and the Research Branch of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission were always understanding — but they have only limited material relevant to the history of early television. Neither New York's marvellous Museum of Broadcasting, which is geared to serving the general public, nor London's National Film Archives, which seems bent on preservation rather than use of its holdings, were able to adjust properly to the needs of rigorous research. Once my credentials as a

4 Asa Briggs, "Problems and Possibilities in the Writing of Broadcasting History," *Media, Culture and Society*, no. 2 (1980), p. 7.

5 The task would have been impossible without the aid of research assistants and the generosity of various funding agencies. Here is a list of the students, graduate and undergraduate, who have laboured on the project over the past two years: Jocelyn Thompson, Nancy Lee, Lyne Gascon, Margaret McCallum, Stephen Baker, Claire Dehenne, Stephen Stropole, Philippe Landreville, and Brigid Higgins. The monies to support their endeavours have come from the Ontario Arts Council, the University of Toronto, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

6 Frank Peers, *The Public Eye: Television and the Politics of Canadian Broadcasting, 1952-68* (Toronto, 1979). Dr. Fred Rainsbetty, a Professor Emeritus at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, has completed an unpublished report on children's television, largely in English Canada. Academe in French Canada has been more active than its anglophone counterpart: Jean-Paul LaFrance, *La Télévision, un média en crise* (Montréal, 1982); Annie Mear, ed., *Recherches québécoises sur la télévision* (Laval, 1980); Pierre Pagé and Renée Legris, *Répertoire des dramatiques québécoises à la télévision 1952-1977* (Montréal, 1977); and, above all, Gérard Laurence, *Histoire des programmes-TV, CBFT Montréal, Septembre 1952-Septembre 1957*, (Ottawa, 1982) which is an exhaustive account of what was broadcast in the first five years of francophone television.

7 John Twomey, *Canadian Broadcasting History Resources in English: Critical Mass or Mess*, (Toronto, 1978). That improvement, I suspect, owes much to the efforts of such people as John Twomey, Robin Woods, and Richard Wright of CBC Toronto, Sam Kula and Ernie Dick of the National Film, Television and Sound Archives (NFTSA) of the Public Archives as well as the activities, conferences, and *Bulletin* of the Association for the Study of Canadian Radio and Television (ASCRT) founded in 1977.

responsible academic had been established, the CTV network (which is understandably hesitant, considering how often it has been savaged by nationalists and critics) proved willing to help, except that its records of the early years are sparse indeed.

How fortunate, then, that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which was the dominant force in television throughout most of the period, has retained an enormous amount of old material. The CBC is like a medieval kingdom, split into separate domains, each with its own horde of records. Some records have been catalogued, but a lot of material resides in dormant files. That can prove awkward; once, while collecting schedule sheets at CBC Ottawa, I came across a confidential memo on expenses which I turned over to my contact person, who promptly destroyed it! Finding one's way through the corporation's labyrinthian bureaucracy requires much diplomacy and patience. It took a couple of months to arrange viewing privileges at CBC Toronto, for example. That said, the individuals in charge of records have in the end been very obliging. Without the openness of the CBC, this project would not have progressed very far.

Slowly, the Public Archives of Canada and the National Library are building up a huge collection of data pertinent to the history of television. One can readily find in Ottawa the various books that have been published about broadcasting as well as the assortment of government studies and reports on the state of television services. Much CBC material is in the process of moving to the Public Archives; the actual broadcasts are being collected by the National Film, Television and Sound Archives of the PAC while the corporation's files are swelling Record Group 41, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, in the Federal Archives Division.⁸ Although this transfer is wise, the Public Archives, CTV, and the other networks could work to preserve more of the records of private television.⁹ Only a cooperative effort will ensure that the story of television in Canada becomes something more than the story of the CBC writ large.

What was on Television?

The first aim of the project has been to answer the question, what was on television? We had to know exactly what kinds of programming were available to viewers. This tedious business is an essential foundation for any understanding of the so-called culture of television. Here, at least, the process of data collection is almost finished. It was easy to acquire the fall schedules (7:00 P.M.-11:00 P.M.) of American networks from published directories.¹⁰ But my research assistants had to determine the program schedules between 6:00 P.M. and midnight from September 1952 on for four Canadian stations: CBLT Toronto (the CBC's flagship station in English Canada), CBFT Montreal (*Radio-Canada's* equivalent),¹¹ CFTO Toronto (the leading station of the CTV network) and

8 A catalogue of the broadcast holdings has recently been published: Jean T. Gu nette and Jacques Gagn  eds., *Inventory of the Collections of the National Film, Television and Sound Archives* (Ottawa, 1983). A brief listing of the contents of RG 41 can be found in Terry Cook and Glenn T. Wright eds., *General Guide Series 1983: Federal Archives Division* (Ottawa, 1983), p. 50.

9 See Richard Wright's complaint about the NFTSA thrust in a review of Gu nette and Gagn  eds., *Inventory* — a review which appeared in the *ASCRT Bulletin*, (April 1984), pp. 10-12.

10 Notably Tim Brooks and Earle Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network TV Shows 1946-Present*, Revised Edition (New York, 1981); and Alex McNeil, *Total Television: A Comprehensive Guide to Programming from 1948 to 1980* (New York, 1980).

11 The first five years of CBFT's schedule, fortunately, had been painstakingly detailed in G rard Laurence, *Histoire des programmes-TV*.



Opening Night, CBLT, Toronto 8 September 1952. Left to right: standing: Jim Ellis, Tom Nutt, Bill Brady, Mavor Moore; seated at control panel: Gordon Shillabeer, Drew Crossan, Valerie Carson, Vic Ferre; foreground: Bill Andrews, Gerry Lee. Courtesy: National Film Television and Sound Archives Division, Public Archives of Canada — CBC Collection, 6615.

CFTM Montreal (the precursor of the private TVA network in Quebec) during the 1960s. Instead of programme logs, which are too unwieldy, the researchers used weekly CBC schedules, the magazine *TV Guide*, and newspaper listings. While these sources only tell what should have appeared, not what did go on the air, that information is sufficient. The findings have been transformed into approximate weekly schedules of regular series for the fall (September through December), spring (January through April), and summer (May through August) seasons which roughly parallel the rhythm of the television year. The schedules have been supplemented by one-week surveys of all available channels in a city to highlight the competitive signals available to viewers.

A mass of partially assimilated fact has been compiled about each of the series which appeared at least four times in a single season. That programme data includes a broadcast history, notes on cast or producer or sponsor, and descriptions of representative episodes. Here the major sources have been the *CBC Times* and *La Semaine à Radio-Canada*, *TV Guide*, and local newspapers. On occasion, unfortunately, these sources are not very informative: what kind of show was “Animal Parade” (CBLT, 4 March-22 April 1959), for example? A complete absence of information is rare. The programme data is supplemented by articles and reports on major series, mostly photocopied from the



Johnny Wayne, Frank Shuster, and Corinne Conley in a spoof of the movie Cleopatra for CBC's Wayne and Shuster Hour 21 October 1963. Courtesy: National Film and Television and Sound Archives Division, Public Archives of Canada — CBC Collection, 12440.

CBC's own reference library in Toronto¹² and a range of periodicals or newspapers. Eventually I will add to these files the results of interviews with the programmers, producers, and actors of the time. In the future I hope to be able to use this programme data to produce a prime-time directory of English-Canadian television for academics and trivia buffs (French-Canadian scholars are well on the way to publishing one for Québec) which will carry the story into the 1980s.

The historian of television can easily fall victim to a bad case of information overload. There seems no end to anecdotes about stars like John Wayne, Frank Shuster, Juliette, or René Levesque, and programmes like "Point de Mire," "Tabloid," or "This Hour Has Seven Days." The data collected so far is more than sufficient to demonstrate the importance of radio's legacy to early television, both in terms of actual shows as well as the conventions of programming (hence the term "radiovision" fits prime-time's beginnings), the influence of the American example, the attempt to create a Canadian style of news, views, and entertainment, and that there really was much innovation and experimentation right through to the mid-1960s.

¹² This was done with the assistance of Elizabeth Jenner and her staff.

The seasonal schedules and the programme data are being used to survey the frequency of the assorted forms of television programming during the "golden age." This content analysis is based upon the identification of twenty distinct forms, reflecting, in particular, the typology outlined by Raymond Williams in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*.¹³ A "form" refers to a particular brand of programming boasting a special shape, character, and style, usually substance and purpose as well, which are designed according to commonly accepted formulas. Among these forms are the newscast, public affairs programme, talk show, variety show, teleplay, movie, action/adventure drama or social melodrama, and the situation comedy. Sometimes there are difficulties identifying the character of a show, especially one from the early years of television when the forms were not well defined and detailed information is lacking — on occasion, a guess had to be made from fragmentary evidence. The effort to quantify has brought the project into the "high tech" age: the essential facts are fed into a relational database which a micro-computer uses to generate figures showing the prominence of the competing forms and genre in a season or over a television year and at various time periods in the evening. It is a laborious process. The count of the American networks, CBLT, CFTO, and a portion of CBFT has been completed.

Perhaps the most striking observation is that the CBC's version of prime-time was very different from its American counterpart. CBS, NBC, and ABC immediately succumbed to the popular and commercial pressure to emphasize mass entertainment at the expense of information and uplift. The force of competition drove them to imitate any successful innovation, which gave birth to successive programming fads that swept through the evening schedule. Over time, this competition also brought a decline in the number of different forms offered viewers. During the fall of 1960, 60 per cent of ABC's peaktime schedule (7:00 P.M.-11:00 P.M.) was made up of action/adventure drama, mostly westerns and crime shows. By contrast CBC and *Radio-Canada* were always committed to programme balance and diversity, to informational programming in the form of news and views as well as features and human interest. During the 1958-59 television year, as a result, 40 per cent of CBFT's prime-time schedule and 29 per cent of its peaktime schedule were consumed by information series. Furthermore, public television in Canada resisted the full brunt of American programming fads: CBLT, for instance, only programmed a modest number of action/adventure shows during their heyday in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The enormously popular western "Gunsmoke" did not appear until the fall of 1960, and then at 11:30 P.M. on Fridays, hardly a time when many people were watching television. Consequently, CTV's emulation of the American model offered viewers a clear alternative: CFTO's peaktime schedule in 1961-62, for example, was peppered with imports like "77 Sunset Strip," "Checkmate," "The Naked City," and "Wagon Train". American entertainment consumed 79 per cent of the total available time. From a viewer's standpoint, at least, such contrasts were all to the good.

What was Television Like?

This kind of content analysis, however, can only provide a general picture of what happened. It masks the fuzziness of the distinctions that are too often made between entertainment and information. It suggests that television's forms were unchanging and

13 There are many typologies and schemes, of course. Gérard Laurence, *Le contenu des médias électroniques* (St. Hyacinthe, 1980) is an especially informative primer on the whole question of content analysis in television history.

distinct, while common sense alone indicates that apparent rigidity is merely a result of the process of analysis. In short, it does not answer the vital question, what was television like? The only way to find an answer is to watch the old shows.

Viewing television's past, unfortunately, raises two perplexing problems: what to view and how to view it. The actual choice of what to view is dependent on accident, and therein lies another tale of the trials and tribulations of television research. It is simply impossible for the historian to emulate the stunts of the semiotician who works with today's output. The cynic might respond that this is all to the good, given the fact that too much TV analysis is full of erudite nonsense dressed up in scientific garb. In any case, many of the productions of the "golden age" have simply disappeared. Little seems to have survived from the early years of private television in Canada, although the CTV network may have at least a sample of its news and public affairs output during the 1960s. The readily available collections of past broadcasts suffer from serious gaps. The Museum of Broadcasting has only a slim list of America's favourites from the fifties: a copy of a typical episode of the famous "Ed Sullivan Show" could not be located (there were some special, unrepresentative editions available, however); nor could we come up with a copy of the western thriller "Have Gun, Will Travel" (although bits and pieces were contained in flashback broadcasts). More worrisome, the CBC does not have complete runs of some of its major offerings: only after much searching were my assistants able to locate a copy of an episode of "CBC Television Theatre," an important dramatic anthology in the 1950s. My Montreal assistants were told that none of the newscasts on *Radio-Canada* from the 1950s and early 1960s had been saved! One reason for the losses was the difficulty of preserving live broadcasts — what survives are "kines" filmed off the television set. But the other, more important reason was sheer neglect.

Nor are all the problems solved even when existing repositories do have valuable holdings.¹⁴ The quality of some of the records is uneven: the Montreal assistants had to scrap one attempt to analyze a tape of "Point de Mire" because the poor quality of the tape made it impossible. Occasionally, the preserved programme has been stripped of commercials; yet television variety and drama were often structured around commercials, which means the analysis will miss an important dimension of the art form and fail to approximate the viewing experience.¹⁵ Apparently no one has kept a copy of a single, complete broadcast day or evening, which is the kind of record vital to analyzing the coherence of the messages sent out at any point in time.¹⁶ Copyright restrictions are obstacles to making a duplicate for research purposes, and that effectively dooms any hope of a deep analysis of most programmes which must depend on a leisurely series of multiple viewings. Indeed, for a few months, the regulations imposed by CBC Montreal had severely limited the viewing time allowed to my assistants. The same problem hindered research in New York and London, and in the latter case the facilities were abominable. By contrast, CBC Toronto allowed wide access to its extensive holdings,

14 So far I have used four different repositories: the National Film Archives in London, Great Britain; the Museum of Broadcasting in New York; and the CBC holdings in Montreal and Toronto. I am particularly grateful to Richard Wright of CBC Toronto for arranging my access to the English-Canadian shows. I intend to view some of the offerings of Canada's private television held by the Public Archives and the CTV library in Toronto.

15 See the excellent analysis of teleplays by Kenneth Hay, "Marty: Aesthetics vs. Medium in Early Television Drama" in John E. O'Connor, ed., *American History/American Television: Interpreting the Video Past* (New York, 1983), pp. 95-133, where Hay talks about the structuring of the drama around commercials.

16 Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (London, 1974), pp. 86-118.

assisted in the task of selecting shows, provided excellent facilities for viewing, and even made some copies of broadcasts, which has resulted in superb returns from the research into the English-language network's offerings. The corporation could exploit these rich visual archives to create a museum of broadcasting in its planned Toronto complex so that people in all walks of life could enjoy television's past.

Historians are always going to rage because broadcasters and archivists showed such indifference to the needs of preservation in the early years of television. That will be especially true of researchers who wish to investigate in depth any particular series or form of television. But the forecast is not completely dismal. It is possible to use other kinds of records to reconstruct the character of many programmes. The CBC's own files plus the previously mentioned CBC records in Record Group 41 in the Federal Archives Division of the PAC contain huge amounts of relevant information on ideas, plans, summaries, reviews, and tests of a wide assortment of broadcasts. The CBC, for example, gave access to copies of some extremely informative research reports on shows from the 1950s such as "Showtime," "Cross-Canada Hit Parade," and "The Barris Beat," which detail the ingredients and style of the shows plus the responses of test audiences. RG 41 contains a very interesting set of expert responses to the broadcast of the opera "Electra" on the CBC network in the early 1960s.¹⁷ The collection of television scripts at York University and the CBC Oral History Project at Carleton University should generate additional information about what went over the airwaves. Indeed interviews with writers, producers, and stars should furnish a lot of information about the way things were. Better yet, the new zeal to preserve television's past is bound to turn up collections of broadcasts in private hands or in the storage rooms of many television stations. And the situation after the general acceptance of videotape is better. Researchers working on the 1970s will probably have less difficulty finding specific samples of broadcasts. Finally, the willingness of repositories to meet the needs of viewing research is sure to grow as a result of the efforts of pioneers in the field.

The present dearth of broadcasts has not posed any serious threat to the success of the project (whatever the cost in frustration and extra effort) since my chief interest is the culture of television — as reflected in the general nature of programming rather than the specific character of any one series. So much of television programming is repetitive; even a tiny sample of it reveals enough to understand the nightly fare offered up by the industry. If "Have Gun, Will Travel" was not available, episodes of "The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp" and "Gunsmoke" were. Although I may not be able to find particular broadcasts made, say, by Wayne and Shuster, still I located a copy of at least one "Wayne & Shuster Hour" programme from 1962. In short, the project members have been able to watch a sufficient sample of broadcasts representative of the main forms of television: a few British programmes, more American shows (though fortunately there are a lot of usable American accounts in the literature), about fifty to sixty Canadian offerings, and a host of commercials.

The more difficult problem, then, was to decide how to watch these shows. It really is not of much value simply to sit in front of a television set with a video-cassette recorder looking at "Hockey Night in Canada," "La Pension Velder" (a successful *téléroman*), or "This Hour Has Seven Days" (the renowned newsmagazine). A complicated scheme of

¹⁷ PAC, Records of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, RG 41, vol. 277, file 11-43-3.

viewing analysis had to be designed which would reveal the shape and messages of the shows. This is where semiotics (the study of signs and their meanings) becomes necessary, in particular the approach to programme analysis pioneered by John Fiske and John Hartley in *Reading Television*. The intent was to “peel” a show to disclose its basic ingredients (especially the conventions which determined its shape) according to some standard criteria which could be easily employed by research assistants. So I designed a single viewing analysis scheme for all regular programmes and a related scheme for advertisements to produce facts and impressions about production techniques, aesthetics, the assorted codes and moods, the role of a mediator (if any), the process of problem solving (if any), images and clichés, and mythologies and ideologies.

This approach can be illustrated with an analysis of one example of a prominent form of television in the “golden age” — the hour-long teleplay. “The Queen of Spades” (broadcast on “CBC Television Theatre” on 28 October 1956) was based upon a short story written by the Russian author Alexander Pushkin and adapted for television by Leo Orenstein. The teleplay was a Faustian tragedy about an immoral adventurer, Ernst Hermann (played by Lloyd Bochner) who strives to overcome chance by securing a magical secret from an old woman, the Countess Anna (played by Mary Savidge), which will enable its master to win at cards. In the process, he exploits her lovelorn charge Lisa (played by Kate Reid) and frightens the Countess to death. Although Hermann wins the secret, he is foiled at the casino by the playing of the Queen of Spades (symbolizing the old woman) and ends the play in an insane asylum, leaving a bereft Lisa to await his recovery. The play was first watched by two of my assistants at CBC Toronto. They filled out a questionnaire during the viewing and then prepared a record of the show after reflection and discussion. I later received a copy of the show which allowed me to complete an in-depth analysis at home. One of my chief concerns was to compare Orenstein’s adaptation with Pushkin’s original.¹⁸

The first task of analysis was to illuminate the technical and aesthetic dimensions of the broadcast by identifying not only the use of camera, sound, and visuals, but also the use of metaphor and stereotype, the structure and sequencing of scenes, the participants’ roles, the mix of dialogue and action, the style of language, and the moods or emotions the programme evoked. Research has proven that it is unwise to try to separate techniques, acting, and script, since television amalgamates all into one grand effort to produce a response in the viewer. The teleplay was an example of sophisticated television. It was made up of a procession of carefully integrated conversations, each packed with meaning, and suffused with a sense of impending doom. The camera work was superb; often the camera would simply focus upon the bodies of the actors, but at times it would slowly pan a scene or a room, look down from an angle highlighting some action, or move into a close-up of a face, all to emphasize a mood. The imagery of the cards, representing both the reality of chance and the promise of victory, reoccurred throughout the teleplay in dialogue, pictures, and Hermann’s horrifying, obsessive imaginings. Hermann’s black dress, his cold eyes, the way he talked and moved underlined his evil passions and intent. Stereotyped images like a rose representing love (a rose that turns into a card in Hermann’s hands!), a gun symbolizing violence, or a ticking clock and a spinning roulette wheel to mark the passage of time were common throughout the teleplay. There was, in

18 I used a Penguin collection of Pushkin’s tales: Alexander Pushkin, *The Queen of Spades and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth, England, 1962).

short, a lot of surplus information or “redundancy,” a series of overlapping signs to hammer home the message.¹⁹ That is normal in television. Television is rarely a subtle medium. Producers must package their meaning in such a fashion that all kinds of viewers can readily and immediately understand what is happening. Here is the reason why even sophisticated television is rarely high art.

The second task was to reveal the nature of the conflict which lay at the heart of this drama. Virtually all television programmes, including newscasts and commercials, revolve around conflict or at least problem solving, which suggests how widespread is the influence of drama upon programming. Indeed Martin Esslin, once head of BBC drama, has remarked that “the language of television is none other than that of drama.”²⁰ Perhaps that is because the appeal of drama is much more general these days than any other mode of expression. At any rate, the tension in “The Queen of Spades” derives from a three-way struggle: Hermann’s search for mastery, Lisa’s yearning for love, and the Countess’ desperate effort to protect her house and her charges. The assumption underlying and regulating these struggles is that the world exists in a balance between heart and mind, emotion and reason, and woe-be-tide the poor souls such as Lisa (whose heart overcame her mind) or Hermann (whose mind rules all) who break the rules of the game of life. Resolution, better yet, revenge, comes with Hermann’s madness and Lisa’s loss. The point is that this was both a simplification and a clarification of themes in Pushkin’s story, which was a much more subtle commentary on the general immorality of the aristocratic world and on the inevitability of disaster. Orenstein had transformed the original into a morality play. That was a lot easier to communicate to a viewer than Pushkin’s jaundiced impression of life. Besides, Orenstein was merely conforming to one of the new conventions of television art. The focus upon the battle between good and evil, in its myriad of variations, came to dominate the dramatic offerings of North American television during the “golden age” — and has lasted to the present day.

The final and most complicated task requires isolating the mythologies and ideologies represented in the programme. Television has been described as the most important mythmaker in the modern age.²¹ (I use the term “myth” to mean an imaginative but stereotyped rendering of experience that is commonly understood throughout a culture.) Television does not usually create myths; rather, it selects, popularizes, and reinforces myths. Put simply, television employs myths to communicate, because the viewer can readily identify myth, and to explain, since myths are a marvellous shortcut to understanding. Although not as obvious as many of the Hollywood dramas, “The Queen of Spades” did make use of such common mythologies as modernity, affluence, and individualism to entertain and educate the viewer.²² It added the mythology of magic, that mysterious tool of mastery which can only be used at one’s peril. And it made use of the mythology of gambling, the realm of chance and fate, to suggest the nature of the

19 For a lengthy discussion of “redundancy” see John Fiske, *Introduction to Communication Studies*, (London, 1982), pp. 10-17.

20 Martin Esslin, *The Age of Television* (San Francisco, 1982), p. 6.

21 This line of argument is becoming commonplace in a growing collection of studies such as John Fiske and John Hartley’s *Reading Television* (London, 1978) and Gregor T. Goethals *The TV Ritual: Worship at the Video Altar* (1981).

22 By “mythology,” I mean a collection of related myths linked together as a story to explain some dimension of the human experience. My viewing scheme focuses on the mythologies of modernity, affluence, community, and individualism, the most common throughout television, though of course many others are also present.

world. Orenstein tried to underline this analogy by locating the opening and closing scenes of Act I and Act III in a casino. (Pushkin located his action in the salons of the Russian upper class.)

“The Queen of Spades” was hardly a preachy drama with explicit guides to living or affairs. Nonetheless, the teleplay did contain a definite outlook on life: an anti-rationalism, a critique of the quest for knowledge, and a celebration of feelings. And Orenstein employed the old notion of women as virtuous beings, creatures of the heart, and men as worldly beings, creatures of the mind. That, by the way, altered Pushkin’s story, in which all the characters were either corrupted or simply naive, in any case pawns of fate. Both Pushkin and Orenstein, however, portrayed Ernst Hermann as a man who had rebelled against the moral conventions of society in an effort to realize his ambition.²³

The lessons to be learned from the whole process of viewing analysis are not yet clear. I still cannot fully answer the question, “what was TV like?” But the findings do suggest that however much the quality of television’s forms varied, their messages were surprisingly similar. The assumption that almost all of prime-time television was hackneyed or mediocre is simply incorrect. Whereas the premiere episode of “Gunsmoke” was predictable, conventional, and easy to understand, the premiere episode of CBC’s “The Plouffe Family” was fast-paced, innovative, and difficult to understand. The range of quality in the teleplay series in particular was extraordinary; some, such as “Ford Theatre’s” “First Born,” starring (of all people) Ronald Reagan, were characterized by weak scripts and bad acting, but others, such as “The New Men” of “General Motors Presents,” which chronicled the exploits of Britain’s wartime atomic scientists, were ambitious, well-crafted efforts to delve into man’s experiences.²⁴ That said, television did speak for a North American way of life. The prevailing myths about the ways of affluence, gender and behaviour, the individual, the family, and the community have proved to be, if not uniform, then much alike in French-Canadian, English-Canadian, and American shows of all kinds. Indeed a lot of the output of television entertainment amounted to stories about life, guides to proper behaviour and right conduct for fathers, mothers, children, neighbours, friends, politicians, and policemen. No wonder the public swiftly became concerned about the morality of a medium whose teachings reached into nearly every home.

Who Watched Television?

The third aim of the project is to answer the question, who watched television? I have collected a wealth of ratings data, research reports, and the like, much of it from the Research Branch of CBC Headquarters in Ottawa.²⁵ That source was invaluable because the private ratings services could not be persuaded to allow me free access to their records.

23 The detailed viewing analysis considers the “social dynamics” evident in the programmes (including what social roles the players represent and so on), the “social engines” (including gender, age, ethnicity, and so on), and the “social attitudes” (including aspiration and deference, acquiescence and accommodation, opposition and revolt, and alienation).

24 The “Ford Theatre” was a popular half-hour teleplay series on NBC. “First Born” was broadcast on 10 September 1952. “General Motors Presents” was an hour-long CBC series, and C.P. Snow’s “The New Men” was broadcast on 27 September 1959.

25 My thanks, in particular, to Arthur Laird, Director of Research, who generously provided me with access to the archives of his office and to Bill Ross who was my guide through the corridors of CBC Headquarters in Ottawa.

One important company, Elliot-Haynes of Toronto, claimed that all of its early material was lost. A.C. Nielsen of Canada could not accommodate researchers because that might upset their business routine, although they graciously allowed me to use their material in the networks' archives. The Bureau of Broadcast Measurement (BBM) was willing to allow some access, though, in the end, study of their records (to 1965) in the National Film, Television and Sound Archives of the PAC was sufficient.

Initial analysis of this material suggests a need for care. A CBC report on the commercial ratings services in 1960 amply demonstrates that all suffered from serious weaknesses: none of their findings could be counted as "reliable" according to the normal standards of statistical analysis.²⁶ Besides, the ratings services concentrated on the family, not the viewer, which meant that their data usually obscured individual habits, especially in the case of programme preferences. But why complain? The fact remains that ratings data provide the historian with a much richer cache of information about the viewers of television than he can find when dealing with the readers of newspapers, magazines, or books.

The television audience was not simply a mass audience. Especially during the 1950s, before the booming of private television, there was an important distinction between "captive" markets (such as Winnipeg or Halifax), where viewers could only receive a single CBC channel, and "competitive" markets (such as Montreal and Toronto), where viewers had some choice. They certainly used that choice; BBM data on Montreal in November 1956 showed, for instance, that many francophones switched to CBC's English-language station on Sunday evenings from 8:00 to 9:00 P.M. to watch "The Ed Sullivan Show" rather than view CBFT's offering, "Music Hall."²⁷ But French-Canadian viewers were captivated by their own form of social drama, the *téléromans* , which ran during the mid-evening timeslot on weekdays and attracted huge audiences. By contrast, English-Canadians displayed a definite preference for American drama and variety right from the beginning, whether they lived in "captive" or "competitive" markets. Toronto and Vancouver data show that early on the CBC had difficulties maintaining its audience levels when running Canadian entertainment at a time when an American station offered some hit show. Detailed polling of test audiences proved that many English Canadians believed American shows were always "better" — except, that is, for Saturday night hockey.²⁸ In any case, the increasing public clamour for choice, and particularly for more of Hollywood's shows, spurred the elimination of CBC's monopoly. And the viewers' preference for things American also helps to explain why the hope that CTV would produce a truly Canadian brand of popular programming went unfulfilled.

Ratings data also demonstrate that the make-up of the audience was not stable, indeed there were different kinds of audiences. International Surveys Limited estimated the audience composition over the course of an evening by age and sex; its February 1959 survey of weekday viewing claimed that women took the honours in the afternoon, that

26 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *Report of the Ratings Review Committee* (Ottawa, 1960). See also LaFrance, *La Télévision*, pp. 41-94 for a detailed critique of ratings data.

27 Bureau of Broadcast Measurement, *Time Period Audience Survey, Television Area Report, November 1956*. The bureau material is available in the National Film, Television and Sound Archives of the PAC in Ottawa.

28 In the mid-1950s, the CBC commissioned a variety of research reports on the responses of English-Canadian audiences to particular entertainment shows. These reports are filled with invaluable data on preferences and habits.

children were in a slight majority between 4:00 P.M. and 6:00 P.M. and remained in substantial numbers until around 9:00 P.M., and that although men entered the scene in droves after 6:00 P.M. women always constituted the largest group of prime-time viewers.²⁹ In a 1958 survey of the weekday habits of 422 adults in Halifax, the CBC discovered that 35 per cent could be counted “light viewers,” watching up to two hours a day, 46 per cent “medium viewers,” watching between 2½ and four hours, and 21 per cent “heavy viewers” because they tuned in from 4½ to nine or more hours each day.³⁰ The CBC was also well aware that there was only a limited audience for its public affairs programmes and that many viewers would switch channels or switch off to avoid education. That perception fuelled the zeal of the producers of “This Hour Has Seven Days” who consciously designed a package of sensation and excitement to win over the indifferent. Indeed an extensive CBC poll in the spring of 1962 showed that there was a discernable “upscale” CBC audience; its supporters were “more likely to be older, to be rather better educated, to have a somewhat higher occupational status, and [were] less likely to have children at home.”³¹

Nonetheless, nearly all viewers shared certain characteristics. The patterns of TV viewing showed that more people watched more often on weekends and that audience levels fell off in the summer months when outdoor activities beckoned. An analysis of test audience responses to “The Plouffe Family” discovered that viewers in Toronto and Winnipeg were overwhelmingly in favour of “dramas which have a happy ending.”³² The CBC’s 1962 poll found that “the great mass of people, French-speaking Canadians especially, feel that commercials interfere with their enjoyment of television programs.”³³ And whatever else they may say about changing fads and preferences, the ratings data indicate that most viewers were almost always in search of relaxation and diversion.

In short, the viewing habit was a mass passion that displayed its own rhythms and routines. This leads me to speculate about the virtues of Paul Klein’s infamous LOP theory: that the most successful show is usually the “Least Objectionable Program” since “most viewers aren’t interested in particular programs” but search the channels “until they arrive at the program that offends them least.”³⁴ In any case, there is no doubt that the preferences of the millions had a steering effect on the shape and content of prime-time.

Did Television Matter?

The final aim is to answer the question, did television matter? No one will be surprised to learn that I believe it did matter a lot even though this presumption cannot yet be proven. The nature of prime-time must be determined before probing the impact of television. That said, a particular research strategy has been adopted. It does not rely on the Harold

29 International Surveys, *Seasonal Listening*, p. 68.

30 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *The 1958 Halifax Study of Leisure Time Activities in the Television Age* (Ottawa, 1959), Table 7.

31 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *What the Canadian Public Thinks of the CBC* (Ottawa, 1963), p. 86.

32 Schwerin Research Corporation, “Additional Information: Basic Audience Characteristics,” *Report C-CBC-55-5. “Plouffe Family,”* p. 4.

33 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, *What the Canadian Public Thinks*, p. 83.

34 Sally Bedell, *Up The Tube: Prime-Time TV in the Silverman Years* (New York, 1981), p. 313. Klein was a prominent television executive with NBC.

Innis/Marshall McLuhan approach since their arguments are too grand, too vague, and too simple-minded to suit my needs.³⁵ Nor does it need the assorted claims of television's omnipotence, or supposed ability to programme people's minds and determine their behaviour, that are sometimes bandied about in popular critiques of the medium.³⁶ Work in the field of the sociology of mass communication demonstrated a long time ago that there are distinct limits to television's power.³⁷ Work in the field of semiotics emphasizes the fact that viewers have a negotiated response to any message and interpret its biases in the light of their own moods and assumptions. Indeed, the viewing habit seems characterized by a good deal of inattentiveness and what has been called "aberrant decoding," a fancy phrase meaning misunderstanding between communicator and consumer over the substance of a message.³⁸

So my approach concentrates on so-called "system effects," which suggest how television fitted into the network of institutions in the Canadian community.³⁹ I am more interested in discovering where television contributed rather than what it caused. The first is provable, the second is not, at least given our present knowledge. One line of questioning will investigate the ways in which television's messages apparently threatened the values, if not the authority, of an older generation, the church, or the school. Therein lay a source of the rising moral clamour over sex and violence on TV, the attack on commercialism, or the worry about children. Another line of questioning will probe how television altered the ways in which the communications media, the marketplace, the political process, the sports industry, or the family operated. Note, for example, the fact that by the late 1960s television had supplanted the daily newspaper as the chief source of news about the world and the country.⁴⁰ What effect, if any, did the enormous popularity of hockey broadcasts have upon the game? Is there any truth to the charge that coverage fostered rough play? Then there is the fact that television has exercised much influence on patterns of behaviour in private and public life. TV was something of a thief, stealing time away from reading, playing, listening, and talking. TV was soon able to schedule events, both a child's bedtime and politician's speech. It has on occasion managed to frame an issue, idea, or person (that is, to organize perceptions, especially about something new) as well as to reinforce or fix a stereotype, whatever its origins, in general discourse. Likewise, there are instances when a programme or an episode has steered or even catalyzed events — purportedly "This Hour Has Seven Days" had this sort of effect.⁴¹

35 Even though Innis's *Empire and Communications* (Oxford, 1950) and McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York, 1964) provide some food for thought. Obviously, I am intrigued by an issue which they dealt with, namely, the social and cultural consequences of the arrival of a novel medium of communication.

36 For something of a parody of this genre see Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* (New York, 1978).

37 Note J.T. Klapper's classic, *The Effects of Mass Communication* (Glencoe, Ill., 1960). A whole library of other works has since detailed the extent and limits of TV's impact.

38 See Fiske and Hartley, *Reading Television*, p. 81.

39 The approach is heavily influenced by Williams, *Television*.

40 Martin Goldfarb Consultants, "The Media and the People," *Report of the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media*, vol. 3: *Good, Bad or Simply Inevitable* (Ottawa, 1970), p. 15.

41 Helen Carscallen, "Nine Years and Seven Days Later," *Content*, 54 (August 1975), pp. 2-9. She estimates that twenty of the three-hundred items aired during the programme's two-year run developed into national issues.

The evidence needed to chart television's significance lies in analyses of advertising campaigns, impact reports on convention and election coverage, polling data, surveys of social and economic statistics, even personal reminiscences. Special studies will be needed of, say, the changing style and content of newspapers or of John Diefenbaker and television. I know that I will have to review the published literature on the times to sort out where television fitted. Here, at least, the main problem will be selecting sources, not finding these sources, since there is an extraordinary amount of material available in libraries and archives pertinent to the place of television.

* * *

In summary, I must emphasize that this project is an example of only one of a number of ways of handling television. John O'Connor, an American scholar, has outlined four approaches to what he calls "television as historical artifact": as a "primary source for historical events," focusing on news and documentaries; "as interpreter of history," requiring close consideration of docudrama and historical compilations; "as industry and as art form," considering the fashion in which advertising and the ratings have determined the conventions of drama or news; and "as social and cultural history," analyzing how programmes reflected or moulded social trends.⁴² A "viewers' history" of prime-time Canada fits best into this last category. The reader may note that I have said very little about the economics of television, or even the networks which furnished its content, although both questions might be of great importance to other historians. Obviously, other kinds of projects will place different demands on the existing archives. Mary Jane Miller, for example, is critical of the CBC because her project on English-Canadian television drama and her efforts to teach the subject of television drama have been hobbled by the fact that much of the drama is gone or lost and access to what remains is restricted.⁴³ The continuing dearth of intelligent analyses of television in English Canada is, however, now more the fault of academe than of either the industry or the archives. I trust, in any case, that this account has served to show what can be done with the records of television.

42 O'Connor, ed., *American History/American Television*, pp. xxii-xxxvii.

43 See Mary Jane Miller, "CBC Television Drama: The Future and the Past," *ASCRT Bulletin*, (December 1983), pp. 19-25.