

Entering the Tribal and Acoustic World. Globally¹

*Michael S. Cross**

This colloquium speaks of the “handing down of culture” and the place of smaller societies in an era of globalization. These are issues of crucial importance for English-speaking Canadians, even if much of Canadian public policy on culture has been either unsuccessful or misdirected. Fortunately, in forgotten corners, there are places where people exchange ideas and images, where newly reborn “tribes” chant and listen. It is now a truism that globalization has homogenized cultures and undermined the ability of nation states to maintain distinctive cultural identities. Just as surely, though, emerging media have helped to decentralize aspects of culture. National culture is absorbed into a commercialized global culture as international business concerns become hegemonic; yet the future may lie with those truly popular cultures which flourish, like weeds, at the edge of our highly cultivated global culture. As the Mexican scholar, Gustavo de Castillo Vera, commented, “... within a “solar system of cultures,” those cultures that survive are those relegated to the periphery” (Gustavo de Castillo Vera, 1992: 267).

Certainly, the paradoxes are many. A recent address by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm alludes to some of them. “Market sovereignty is not a complement to liberal democracy”; he contends, “it is an

¹ An earlier version of this paper can be found on the web site of Heritage Canada.

* Dalhousie University.

alternative to it. Indeed, it is an alternative to any kind of politics, as it denies the need for *political* decisions, which are precisely the decisions about common or group interests as distinct from the sum of choices, rational or otherwise, of individuals pursuing private preferences.” Yet, he points out, the media — the true sceptres of market sovereignty — mitigate the force of the market. In pursuit of their own financial choices, the media amplify public opinion, allow public discontent to wash over politicians (Hobsbawm, 2001).

South Africans struggled for decades to throw off a suffocating foreign rule. They now can enjoy a steady diet of foreign television programmes even on the public SABC, a broadcaster which one critic has described as “hypercommercialized” (Schechter, 2000). The new culture minister of Québec raised a storm by suggesting that Ontario did not have a distinctive culture in the same sense as Québec did. Angry Ontarians responded by pointing to the cultural riches of Toronto, such as the long-run musicals imported from Britain and the United States and the art treasures purchased from Europe.

Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian communications philosopher, proclaimed in 1956 that electronic media were creating an environment in which everyone could access information, and each other, simultaneously. The world was now replicating the experience of a village where everyone knew of every development. “With the return of simultaneity we enter the tribal and acoustic world once more. Globally” (McLuhan, 1964). It is an insight of central importance, but we can no longer afford to contemplate the changes wrought by technology with the same lofty detachment as McLuhan. The results of the processes are more ambiguous than he imagined. “Global” is a term which has been appropriated to justify and glorify the market sovereignty that so troubles Eric Hobsbawm. The acoustic world intersects with a new genre of visual/literary/acoustic environment on the Internet. There is a global village, most evident in the interconnected millions using chat programmes on their computers. Yet the tribes in our simultaneous environment are often at war with each other. We seem to have carried the worst aspects of the mechanical age with us into the electronic, acoustic age.

English-Canadians find themselves at all of the crossroads at once. An earlier form of market sovereignty, or perhaps economic colonialism, tied Canada closely into the economy of the United States. Canadian industry has had levels of foreign ownership which are greater than those in any other developed country. The cultural sovereignty of the United States has been even more pronounced; more than 85 percent of sound recordings in the English-Canadian domestic market, 95 to 97 percent of film earnings and 75 to

80 percent of retail book sales are foreign, mostly American (Industry Canada, 1997; Thompson, 1992). Yet Canadians are also at the forefront of the new technologies of communication. They were the first people to embrace cable television distribution, they use the Internet more than anyone else except the Danes, they have adopted on-line merchandising and file swapping, legal and illegal. English-Canadians pioneered the exploration of new media, first Harold Adams Innis, then Marshall McLuhan and more recently Arthur Kroker and Derrick de Kerckhove (Innis, 1951; McLuhan, 1964; Kroker, 1984; de Kerckhove, 1995).

English-Canadians also illustrate the complexity of this McLuhanesque world. Electronic communications have created a “global village” in the sense that they have changed the scale of interrelationships. Simultaneous, world-wide communications throw very different sorts of communities together, just as people are forced together in a village. McLuhan pointed out that, in the contemporary world, the term “mass media” no longer refers, as in the traditional definition, to the size of the audience. Rather, it suggests the simultaneous involvement of people with the media (McLuhan, 1964; de Kerckhove, 1995). The global village concept does not imply a bucolic simplicity, however, nor does it require a single cultural template. The Canadian experience is that electronic media contribute to complexity and to cultural conflicts. Globalization generates localism, and it sets great cultures against small ones.

The existence of a global bourgeois culture is apparent. Perhaps there has always been such a culture; Haydn and Mozart fit into cultural circles in England and France as comfortably as in Austria. Canada has experienced the reality of at least transnational cultures for generations. A famous example is that of the Cuban missile crisis in the autumn of 1962. The Canadian government was uncertain about American actions and declined to mobilize Canadian forces in support of the American blockade of Cuba. Canadian air force commanders put their planes on alert anyway, in defiance of their own government. Their prime loyalty was to their professional class of the military, a class which cut across national borders. The military is only one case of the global classes which have proliferated, alignments which often have only the loosest attachment to any particular national interest. Global business people, the Catholic Church hierarchy, popular entertainers, these are examples of transnational interest groups. David Welch, a historian at the University of Kent in England, sums it up well: “‘Empowered’ classes now transcend national boundaries. Middle class groups in Europe, for example, have more in common than different classes/groups within one nation state. They consume the same products and they hold the same aspirations” (Welch, 2000).

Globalization has done more than provide common economic interests to dominant groups, however. There is evidence that the electronic media have contributed to a convergence of values, at least among certain social orders. The *World Values Survey*, which has been assessing social attitudes in many countries since the 1970's, has found a convergence towards what are called "post-materialist" values of autonomy, cosmopolitanism, and lack of deference for authority. This convergence has been explained largely in terms of economic security, yet it is surely true that media have been the agents of dissemination of these values (Nevitte, Basanez and Inglehart, 1992; McChesney, 2001; Gruneau and Whitson, 1993). The connection of convergent values to affluence and to media access makes it a phenomenon particular to certain classes in national societies. Global citizenship belongs to those who have global information. Coverage of foreign news has declined substantially, at least in the press of the English-speaking world. In the United States, for example, the proportion of foreign news in newspapers fell from 20 percent to 2 percent over the last two decades, and the proportion of foreign news on television tumbled from 45 percent to 13 percent. Yet there is a niche or "demassified" audience which receives far more, and far better, foreign news. Philip M. Taylor points out that the best foreign coverage in Britain is provided by the *Financial Times*, a paper directed at an affluent, minority readership. "... technology allows those niche audiences to be less dependent on the profession of news journalism to mediate the doings of the few to the many — because the few can communicate to the few who can afford it" (Taylor, 2000; Hargreaves, 2000).

Inherent in this global bourgeois culture is the reality that great societies hand down shop-worn versions of their cultural forms to small societies. That does not imply that globalization requires the elimination of national cultures. It is both more complicated, and more disquieting than that. David Rothkopf, a former official in the United States Department of Commerce and now an academic and consultant, makes the case best. He notes that elites in many countries have already recognized "that to compete in the global marketplace they must conform to the culture of that marketplace." We have created, he argues, a multicultural international society.

Successful multicultural societies ... discern those aspects of culture that do not threaten union, stability, or prosperity (such as food, holidays, rituals, and music) and allow them to flourish. But they counteract or eradicate the more subversive elements of culture (exclusionary aspects of religion, language, and political/ideological beliefs). ... The greater public good warrants eliminating those cultural characteristics that promote conflict or prevent harmony, even as

less-divisive, more personally observed cultural distinctions are celebrated and preserved (Rothkopf, 1997).

Canadian cultural policy has embodied an inchoate sense of the issues. For eighty years, successive Canadian governments have sought to protect and promote domestic media, on the understanding that purely market-driven media would undermine Canadian culture and Canadian values (Foster, 1982; Thompson, 1992; Vipond, 1982; CRTC, 1997). Much of that effort was in vain. Attempts to protect Canadian magazines in the 1920's and again in the 1970's had little effect on the dominance of American publications in the Canadian market. Canadian content regulations for television were first introduced in 1960, compelling stations to meet a minimum standard of 55 percent Canadian programming, a figure later raised to 60 percent. Despite the regulations, English-Canadians continued to watch American shows on cable television. More, the regulations, and indeed Canadian television broadcasting itself, were introduced long after the patterns of television production had been established in the United States. The style of television, from its pace to its advertisements, was American, whether programs were produced by Americans or Canadians.

Only the regulations for music had some force. The Canadian Radio-Television Commission, an agency of the federal government, in 1970 introduced a requirement of 30 percent Canadian content in the music played on radio, "Canadian content" meaning that at least two of the aspects of the music — the composer, the lyricist, the performer, or the performance/recording venue — had to be Canadian. The regulations helped to create a modest recording industry in Canada and to nourish some pop stars. The *Tragically Hip* are the most striking recent example of a phenomenon that was hardly dreamed of before 1970. This band from Kingston, Ontario, which frequently uses Canadian places and themes in its songs, has enjoyed an extended and profitable career, without performing the once inevitable trek to the greener pastures of the United States.

Perhaps more important are the regional musicians who have been able to find an audience, in part because of the broadcast rules. Eastern Canada has felt an explosion of homegrown musical talent. Some of it was pop music, enough to win Halifax, Nova Scotia, the nickname of "Seattle East," a rival to Seattle's famed "grunge scene." Much more was rooted in the region's real, or imagined, Celtic past² (McKay,

² Some historians have argued that a Celtic myth was consciously created by governments and elites to sell the region to tourists, and that the myth has stunted the development of a modern society. That argument is not supported in this paper.

1994). The success of East Coast music reminds us of several important issues in the age of electronic media. McLuhan had little to say about music, although he did love bagpipes and might then approve of East Coast Celtishness. Yet music suggests the validity of his contentions about the decentralizing tendencies of electronic media, tendencies which pull in quite different directions from the more apparent globalizing tendencies. The music experience also shows how modern media can operate horizontally rather than vertically.

Paolo Mancini, a professor of communications at Perugia, explains the diversity and vitality of Italian public life, and the high level of participation in public affairs, as partly due to the fact that the media has encouraged horizontal communication. The media have permitted citizens to debate with each other, to exchange ideas with each other, rather than simply operating as conduits between decision-makers and the public, as most Western models of the media contend (Mancini, 2000). It would be utopian to believe that most Canadian media have played or will play such a role. The press has been highly concentrated in Canada, and interlocking media giants such as Rogers Communications have asserted control over both print and broadcast media.³ Government policy and regulatory practice have encouraged centralization of television services in networks that provide minimal regional or local programming. Yet music seems to be an exception.

Non-Canadian sources provided nearly 90 percent of new popular music releases in Canada in 1995-1996 (Statistics Canada). That statistic disguises another reality, however. Lively and growing regional musical scenes have emerged. Small-scale recording studios have allowed musicians and public to communicate, at least within the regional boundaries. Local radio stations have often aided in publicizing indigenous musicians. All this happens despite, rather than because, of national policies. English-Canada's public broadcaster, the CBC, has sharply reduced local programming and become as centralized as private broadcasters. Yet more and more regionally-based musicians are able to be heard and to earn a living as artists.

National cultural values may be no less coercive than transnational ones. The struggle of the Zapatistas in Mexico illustrates this reality. So, too, does the continuing disagreement in Canada between Québec and Ottawa over communications policy. The Liberal government of Québec issued a position paper on communications policy in November 1973 which pointed out that "To confuse national unity and national uniformity by centralizing the decision-making powers inevitably creates a factor of discussion and rupture." The Secretary of State in the federal Liberal government, Gérard Pelletier, responded that assertions

of provincial authority in communications would “undermine the cohesion of the Canadian state, which ... was born from communications in the era of the railways...” (Foster, 1982). Pelletier’s comment reflects the preoccupation with communications that springs from proximity to the United States, and from a sense that Canada is, in the words of two media scholars from Colorado, “a nation which has a technical, but little social, being” (Tracey and Redal, 1995). This preoccupation has been a valid one, but in so far as it has produced policies which discourage regional cultures, it has also been self-defeating.

There is a vast literature on globalization and culture, full of discussions of “cultural imperialism,” “core and periphery” models, and liberal internationalism (Lerner, 1963; Panitch and Leys, 1999, Eds.; Hamelink, 1996; Appadurai, 1990). A more useful model than these, from an English-Canadian perspective, may be that of cultural mediation. The mediation model complements McLuhan’s insights about the interactive nature of electronic media, which require intense sensory involvement in the user. Mediation is a “‘structuring process’ that arranges and rearranges both the interaction of the members of the audience with the media and their creation of the meaning of that interaction.” There is mediation at the individual level, influenced by the person’s sex, age and immediate cultural environment. There is “situational” mediation, for example the politics of the family which comes into play because a television set is watched at home. There is “institutional” mediation, which is the influence on the audience of membership in social institutions such as the family, neighbourhood or nation. And, finally, there is “technological” mediation, in the McLuhanesque sense. Television as an electronic medium, for example, interacts with the audience in very different ways than “hot” media such as books. All of these mediating factors are in play at the same time, often making it difficult to sort out the role of any particular factor (Orozco-Gomes, 1995; McLuhan, 1995).

Canadian public policy has privileged a few of the forms of mediation. It has fostered state mediated cultural reception, and has, in the vein of David Rothkopf, encouraged certain unthreatening cultural institutions under the mantle of multiculturalism. However, individuals and groups read communications in their own ways and sometimes can use the electronic media for purposes less conventional. Music, it has been suggested, has helped some Canadians to communicate with others within their regions, to find a sense of cultural identity separate from that of global bourgeois culture. There are other examples. African-Americans have been subjected to wave after wave of cultural appropriation. From the cakewalk

³ Rogers is Canada’s largest cable television provider. It controls AT&T Canada Wireless, a cell phone network. It owns 30 radio stations, 4 television services, 11 consumer magazines and 40 business magazines.

and ragtime, to jump blues and rhythm and blues, to hip hop and rap, their popular musical forms have been adopted and reshaped by European-Americans. Yet new forms have always emerged to express cultural needs. Even more telling, African-Americans have been able to employ their music for their own purposes, even while it was being appropriated by the mainstream society. Chuck D, of the controversial group Public Enemy, described rap as the “CNN of black people.” It has continued to fill such a role, even though white suburbanites purchase most rap. It has done so because the attitude and context of the music is crucially important, as it is in all cultural exchanges. A person who shares the very specific sense of place and time that informs much rap music, will understand it in a different way than someone who does not (Best and Kellner, 1999; Fernando Jr., 1994; Kleinhans, 1994). Music, whether rap or soul or punk, is at best a partly realized expression of difference or politics, of course — even in an acoustic world. It can, all the same, communicate the most important of messages; as Greil Marcus said of punk, “the music made a promise that things did not have to be as they seemed, and some brave people set out to keep that promise for themselves” (Marcus, 1993).

None of this underestimates the difficulty of maintaining alternatives in the face of economic globalization. The very economic motivations of the great culture offer hope, in a perverse way, however. Erich Fromm, the theorist who did so much to aid our understanding of technological alienation, pointed out in 1968 that the greed of the media, their need for an audience, led them to disseminate dissenting ideas, so long as someone would pay to receive those ideas (Fromm, 1968). The commercial success of a revolutionary music group such as Rage Against the Machine confirms Fromm’s insight. So does *nortec* music, in a rather different way. This new Mexican form, a blend of techno dance music with traditional northern Mexican styles, emerged because of technological and economic impulses. San Diego, California, radio stations erected transmitters in Mexico to evade American government regulations. Musicians in Tijuana, Mexico, were introduced to a variety of electronic music forms from these transmitters. They began to shape their own version, aided by another modern technology. CD “burners” permitted them to create their own recordings very cheaply, without having to submit to record company dictation. The commercial motivations of American radio stations combined with American-Japanese recording technology to encourage the emergence of a regional style of music (Strauss, 2001).

The Mexican example is instructive in many ways. The Zapatista rebellion in the province of Chiapas has emphasized the need to respect cultural difference. The rebellion has drawn the support of many

different groups, including American musicians. Subcommandante Marcos, the spokesperson for the Zapatistas, appeared on a roundtable in October 1999 with, among others, Zach de la Rocha, the vocalist of Rage Against the Machine. Marcos explained the revolution:

There are many groups ... who have also made a weapon of resistance, and they are using it. And ... there are indigenous, there are workers, there are homosexuals, there are lesbians, there are students, there are young people. Above all there are young people, men and women, who name their own identities: “punk,” “ska,” “goth,” “metal,” “trasher,” “rapper,” “hip-hopper,” and “etceteras.” If we look at what they have in common, we will see they have nothing in common, that they are all “different.” They are “others.” And that is exactly what we have in common, that we are “other,” and “different.” Not only that, we also have in common that we are fighting in order to continue being “other” and “different,” and that is what we are resisting for. And we are “other,” and “different,” to the powerful, or we are not like what they want us to be, but rather just as we are (EZLN, 1999).

The Zapatistas have another message. They, and their supporters abroad, have employed electronic media with great sophistication. The rebels first reached the news media of the world by fax. Then the Internet came into play. Groups across the continent had sprung up to oppose the North American free trade agreement, communicating with each other by Internet. The Zapatistas were able to connect with this network as well as an existent network — or, as they referred to it, a “hammock” — of indigenous groups (Clever, 1994).

The use of the new media to coordinate protest was confirmed in the most dramatic terms at the Seattle demonstrations against the World Trade Organization in December 1999. The Canadian Intelligence Service, the national security force, has expressed its concern over the ease with which the Internet and cellular phones permitted a large number of disparate groups to harmonize their efforts. Indeed, CSIS points out, “The Internet has breathed new life into the anarchist philosophy, permitting communication and coordination without the need for a central source of command and facilitating coordinated actions with minimal resources and bureaucracy” (Canadian Security Intelligence Service, 2000). Canadians have played an important part in these activities and, as this is written, similar preparations are underway to confront trade negotiators in Québec city.⁴

⁴ CBC-Radio, Tadrario, 2001.

This is of broader significance than political protest. The Internet brings us close to McLuhan's contention that, with the simultaneous nature of electricity and its extension of our senses, "Men are suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before, free from fragmentary specialism as never before — but also involved in the total social process as never before..." (McLuhan, 1964). Commonplaces about net research and telecommuting are small parts of the emerging reality. Internet chat and e-mail are new forms of interaction, ones closer to the acoustic than to the literary. People use them, at least for personal communication, as they use speech. Short forms, symbols, uncompleted thoughts, the Internet correspondence requires the recipient or participant to fill in the gaps, to be involved, in the same way that speech conversation does. This is unlike literary forms which strive for completeness, rather than cooperative involvement (Gleick, 1999).⁵

New interactive media have usually been discussed in terms of their potential for global communication. Yet clearly they have local significance, as instruments for communicating regional and community concerns, at the same time as they open the world at large. This is consistent with the different layers of mediation that operate in our reception of media. The capacity to download music, for example, permits people to sample music from many cultures. It also has the potential to enrich their own cultures. Cheaper creation and distribution of music could allow local artists, whose work is uneconomic in the traditional music business, to find an audience, and an income (Dolsma, 2000).

The Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission has chosen not to attempt to regulate the Internet. This is presumably because of the obvious technical difficulties in doing so, rather than for considered reasons of policy. Given our experience with previous attempts at national regulation, this is sensible. But it is not enough. The CRTC could do much to advance local and regional cultures by encouraging government to invest in broadband infrastructure. If every home had cheap, rapid access to the Internet, Canada could begin to test the potential of electronic media for cultural enhancement. Then Marshall McLuhan would be, at last, a prophet honoured in his own country.

⁵ Sun Microsystems carried out a study in 1997 which found that people do not read on the Internet in a literary fashion, either. They scan and sample, again in a fashion closer to speech.

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