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Radio and Sound Recording Policy in Canada — Karyna Laroche & Will Straw

The discourse of cultural policy formulation in Canada has long incorporated within it many of the terms of the intellectual debate over definitions of Canadian culture. Those administering public policy in the areas of broadcasting, the cinema and the fine arts routinely have recourse to notions of the 'specifically Canadian', however vaguely or narrowly defined, as a criterion in the allocation of public resources. The commissioning of academic research in an attempt to define this specificity has become a predictable undertaking of those commissions of inquiry with which the history of cultural policy development in Canada is punctuated.

Discussion of public policy towards the popular music industries (broadcasters and recording companies) has for the most part remained indifferent to such questions, for a variety of reasons. The traditional problems of isolating and characterising, in substantive terms, the 'content' of musical works is clearly one of these, as is the lingering conviction that the process by which musical performers emerge from communities to make recordings is itself proof of their cultural authenticity. Policies directed at the sound recording industries are predicated on the assumption that a high level of indigenous musical activity is a permanent feature of Canadian culture, and that the problems to be addressed are those of exposure, investment and dissemination. While, as a consequence, debates over the cultural status of popular music as a national form have remained relatively impoverished within Canada, this involves a partial recognition that the problems confronting it are almost exclusively economic ones.

In 1985, twelve foreign-owned firms accounted for 87% of revenues of the sound recording industry in Canada. While this situation is hardly unique within the international context, it is at the heart of the two significant tensions which public policy in this area has confronted. The first is that between a regulated broadcasting sector whose ownership is exclusively Canadian and the unregulated, foreign-dominated recording industry which supplies the bulk of its programming materials. The second is that between a Canadian-owned recording sector which produces 71% of all records with Canadian content and those multinational companies whose distribution operations provide the principal channels for disseminating Canadian records. Both of these tensions have resulted in uneasy political or economic alliances which recent political or economic developments are likely to test.

In 1971, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission instituted a requirement that radio station playlists include a specified percentage of Canadian music (a percentage which has varied over time and from one musical format to another). Over the fifteen years which followed, the regulation of broadcasting emerged as the principal means through which federal policy

makers have intervened in the sound recording sector. The weaknesses of the domestic recording industry have come to be expressed most frequently by broadcasters, as the unavailability to them of sufficient quantities of Canadian recordings for Canadian content playlist quotas to be met. The development of a subsidised base of recordings from which Canadian content requirements may be fulfilled has, in the eyes of many observers, been an implicit demand of Canadian broadcasters since the imposition of Canadian musical content regulations, and, as a political objective, secondary only to the maintenance of Canadian content quotas at existent or reduced levels. One long-term effect of this, observers note, has been to render the domestic recording industry politically inactive, reliant upon the broadcasting sector to advance its interests indirectly with the federal government.

Over the past decade, two initiatives designed to strengthen a domestic recording industry have been launched. In 1982, a variety of broadcasting concerns joined with the Canadian Independent Record Production Association (CIRPA) to create the Foundation to Assist Canadian Talent on Record (FACTOR). FACTOR has functioned principally to administer the granting of loans for the production of recorded music and videoclips, allocating these on the basis of a jury system within which the personnel and needs of the private broadcasting sector have been dominant.

The alliance between domestic record companies and the broadcasters participant within FACTOR has now always proved comfortable, in part because broadcasters do not regard independent, domestic record companies as the natural or most efficient sources of recordings with Canadian content. The most recent report of the Federal Standing Committee on Communications and Culture noted the dissatisfaction of radio broadcasters with the failure of independent record companies to undertake the distribution and promotion necessary to render their products popular and desirable. International tendencies towards the integration of television and cinema within the promotion of popular music have heightened the perception that music programming unaccompanied by the accoutrements of celebrity and elaborate strategies for exposure will prove unattractive to radio audiences. In the attitudes of certain broadcasters, a shift of sorts has been evident in recent years, from a concern with the simple availability of Canadian recordings meeting international standards to a demand that these acquire a presence in what is increasingly a hit-oriented and international market.

The federally-funded Sound Recording Development Program (SRDP), launched by the Department of Communications in 1986, was intended to allocate resources directly to the sound recording industry. Its mandate includes the investment of \$25 million over five years, with monies to be administered by a variety of institutions, including FACTOR (and its Francophone equivalent, Action/Canada), the arts-oriented Canada Council, and the Department of Communication itself (which, since 1980, has overseen policy in the area of Arts and Culture.)

In recognising the importance of a stable economic and institutional

infrastructure for the recording industry, policy makers were clearly responding not only to claims that the domestic industry suffered from under-capitalisation and a lack of distribution facilities, but also to the argument that the size of the domestic market for recordings made international success an economic necessity. The SRDP maintained the direct subsidy to record production which had been FACTOR's principal function, and added a variety of other activities for which monies were targeted: syndicated radio programming, international touring, the production of specialised musics, international marketing, business development, and the distribution of specialised musics. Certain of these activities involve the application, to the recording sector, of the forms of assistance in international marketing and promotion available to other industries.

The creation of a 'Specialized Music Distribution Service' is intended primarily for those forms of music with little demonstrated commercial appeal (experimental, electro-acoustic and ethnic musics), and its usefulness to domestic producers of more popular forms remains to be seen. Other features of the SRDP, such as its support of professional training and business development, involve recognition of the importance of distribution networks for more commercial and conventional forms of music, and it is in large part on the SRDP's activities in this area that judgements as to its success are likely to be based.

Over the last 15 years, the most successful domestic record companies within Canada have been built on a relationship with one or more rock groups wherein management, recording and such subsidiary activities as publishing and touring are handled by a single firm. These arrangements have usually involved an affiliation with a multinational for the purposes of domestic distribution and a possible international contract for their signed acts. With variable success, these so-called second tier companies have then recorded a variety of domestic performers of lesser potential and used their affiliated major label to distribute these across Canada. By bearing the bulk of the risk in breaking new artists in exchange for access to distribution and retail networks, these domestic firms have, in a pattern with parallels internationally, become efficient and inexpensive means of market-testing and product development for the multinationals operative within Canada.

This system, with its limited benefits to the domestic recording sector, is itself in danger as a result of the impending Free Trade agreement between Canada and the United States. Arguably, the risks posed by the agreement have less to do with the probable future success of Canadian performers than with the indirect forms of cross-subsidisation which remain within the present system. In 1988, an unprecedented number of Canadian acts have been signed directly to firms based in the U.S., bypassing their domestic branches entirely and diminishing the gatekeeping role of Canadian labels affiliated with multinationals. More ominously, one scenario for the reorganisation of record distribution in Canada envisions a number of North-South corridors running from the U.S. into regions of Canada, replacing the East-West system presently in effect domestically. The

disappearance of a cross-country distribution network, even one owned by multinational firms, would precipitate a crisis for domestic record companies resolvable only through the emergence of an entirely new domestic distribution infrastructure. The role of public funds in the maintenance of such an infrastructure, and its place within a coherent sound recording industry policy, remains to be seen.

One fact which emerges from a reading of the recent history of Canadian popular music is the extent to which the fate of local musical forms domestically is linked to the historically variable status of localism within the international recording industry. The great success of Québécois popular music and Anglo-Canadian singer-songwriters in the early 1970s was rooted in domestic cultural tendencies, but seems, in retrospect, inseparable from the surge in 'localism' as a musical value internationally during that period. Similarly, the significant but frequently-neglected boom in the production of disco records in Montreal in the late 1970s participated in a worldwide dispersion of the production of such music into a number of excentric metropolitan centres (Munich, Paris, etc.). Currently, the rich and active post-punk music scenes of virtually all Canadian cities manifest the paradox of such scenes throughout the Western world, with their combination of grass-roots infrastructures of production and performance and the musical forms of an international rock vernacular.

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