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The Depoliticisation of Gender: Sex-Role Stereotyping and Broadcasting Policy — Eileen Saunders

Over the past decade in Canada, there have been dramatic developments in respect of the official, state regulation of sex-role stereotyping in the broadcast media. These developments are a key example of the state being occupied as a site of struggle by feminists, and they are also an instance of the fundamental failure of liberal feminism to challenge the patriarchal underpinnings of broadcasting in this country. The lessons to be learned are critical if the feminist movement ever hopes to fully understand the potential of feminist political agency, and the limits to the state's capacity to accommodate feminist demands.

The release of new policy on sex-role stereotyping in the Canadian broadcast media in December, 1986, by the federal regulatory body, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), supposedly offered a closure to this drama, a closure which has been heralded (or conversely decried) in many quarters as a victory for feminist forces in this country. Canada was soon cast as a world-leader in the regulation of sexist-stereotyping and Canadian women were being told, by prominent members of the feminist community, that the promised land was just around the corner. So, for example, Sylvia Spring, a well-known activist in feminist media circles and founding member of MediaWatch, the key organisation in the feminist lobby for stricter controls in the media portrayal of women, proclaimed:

... I want to tell you that we women are about to make a giant leap forward into the media spotlight. Communications policy is about to change drastically and Canadian women are playing a pivotal role in the event [Spring, 1987, p.5].

The heady optimism reflected in these remarks reflects a more general view that somehow the feminist lobby has won its battle with industry and state forces, and has thereby created a point of entry for feminist-informed policy in the regulation of our cultural industries. The basis for this optimism needs to be interrogated, not only I would suggest because it is misplaced, but more importantly because it has the long term consequence of undermining a critical political intervention which might actually challenge both the conventions of gender representation and the context of cultural production and distribution in Canada. In order to properly understand the context of this critique, an historical account of the evolution of the debate is necessary.

In April, 1979, the short-lived Committee to Monitor Sexist Stereotyping in the Electronic Media was established by the former Minister of Communications, Jeanne Sauve, and directed to carry out ongoing monitoring of the broadcasting industry for sexist content. At the same time the CRTC was asked to develop guidelines and standards to bring about the elimination of sex-role stereotyping in broadcasting. [The broader context to this initiative was an attempt by the federal government to develop a 'national action plan' for righting the wrongs against Canadian women, a plan laid out in its 1979 report Towards Equality for Women. The federal government was in the increasingly embarrassing situation of having to justify its very obvious failure to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women of almost a decade earlier, and was engaged in attempts to recoup legitimacy on a number of fronts.]

With the defeat of the Liberal government and the rise to power of the Progressive Conservatives later that same year, the Committee was disbanded and resurrected in the form of a CRTC Task Force on Sex-Role Stereotyping in the Broadcast Media. Their mandate was clear:

... (the task force's) purpose will be to delineate guidelines for a more positive (and realistic) portrayal of women in radio and television... and to make policy recommendations for consideration by the Commission and the broadcast industry [Task Force on Sex-role Stereotyping in the Broadcast Media, 1982, p.1].

The crucial first step in carrying out that mandate was to frame the problem within a political discourse which would both embrace the rhetoric of reformism and yet not run the risk of alienating broadcasters and advertisers. The necessity of a compromise position was evident from the beginning as the Task Force was comprised of nineteen members representing the CRTC, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), private broadcasting, the advertising industry and the 'public' (operationalised in large measure to reflect a range of governmental and non-governmental women's organisations). At its first meeting in October, 1979, the Task Force made several critical decisions which were to significantly shape the final outcome of its deliberations. Perhaps the most important was the decision to focus only on the portrayal and representation of women in media content, and to ignore those issues addressing the context of women's location in the broadcasting industry (see CRTC, 1986, p.2). This step signalled a key turning point for any subsequent policy discussions; it was now assumed that the conventions of gender representation could be seen as separate and independent from the contexts of media production.

A second critical decision was that the Task Force would undertake no new research because, in its view, 'the problem of sex-role stereotyping has already been well defined and well documented' (Task Force, 1982, p.3). As a result the central problematic as already established in the media/gender research literature was simply adopted by the Task Force; a problematic which quite clearly emanated from a liberal feminist tradition. This meant a focus on the 'image' and the numerical tabulation of its occurrence. The decade of content analysis referred to by the Task Force focused on such categories as frequency of appearance, personality characteristics, behavioural traits, occupational differences, age and physical appearance, commercial production association and marital/parental status identification (see Janus, 1978). This research tradition was firmly wedded to a conception of progress as the simple numerical alteration of images of women in each of these categories. The essential thrust of the argument was that the media were distorting the reality of the social condition of

women, and consequently should be pressured to reflect the changes in the social system. Realism became the yardstick for change, and the education and persuasion of the broadcasting industry became the obvious tools to bring it about.

Following public hearings held across the country and a series of submissions by public and private interest groups, the Task Force published its report, *Images of Women* in September, 1982. Among the twenty recommendations, the key one was the establishment of a two-year period of self-regulation during which broadcast media and the advertising industry were asked to 'improve' their portrayal of women and undertake initiatives to educate their members. This was to take place within a context of periodic monitoring by the CRTC for evidence of improvement, submission of progress reports by broadcast licensees to the Commission, and an overall assessment of effectivity at the end of the two-year period.

What followed the release of this report was an initial flurry of activity by groups like the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) and the Canadian Advertising Foundation (CAF) directed largely to establishing committees on sex-role stereotyping, holding educational seminars for its members and passing on complaints from the public to individual broadcasters or advertisers. Not only did this activity diminish considerably over time (for example, the CAB's Standing Committee on Sex-Role Stereotyping, established in 1982, was eventually disbanded and replaced in 1985 in a more diluted form by a Societal Issues Committee whose mandate also included violence, children's programming and native broadcasting along with sex-role stereotyping and other issues), but there was little progress made in developing and implementing the voluntary codes asked for by the Task Force. Among broadcasters, for example, only 4% of the stations which submitted reports to the CRTC had adopted guidelines for purchased programming or commercial acceptability: 14% had such guidelines for self-produced programming and commercials (CRTC, 1986, p.8).

As the two-year self-regulatory period stretched into three, it became clear that the hands-off approach taken by the Commission was not bearing the fruit that had been anticipated, i.e. a change in the portrayal of women that could be numerically demonstrated through content analysis and held up as a reflection of the 'real' roles played by women in Canadian society. This was confirmed in several research studies, including the CRTC's own commissioned study released in January, 1986, and reiterated in presentations and submissions during public hearings held by the Commission the following April.

The clash of interests between broadcasters and advertisers on the one hand and increasingly vocal women's groups on the other could no longer be stage-managed by the CRTC through the rhetoric of pure self-regulation. The empirical yardstick to which it was wedded left little room for debate: no real quantitative change had taken place in the seven years since the work of the Task Force had begun. The acceptance of this glaring fact on the part of the CRTC did not bring about a reconsideration of the underlying premises of the Task Force or a

refocusing on the interconnections between the structures of production and the organisation of media discourses on women. What it prompted was a new direction in self-regulation, only now cast as 'get-tough' legislation.

While arguing that self-regulation had been 'partially successful', especially in heightening awareness of the issues, the CRTC admitted that further action was necessary. The resulting policy statement released in December, 1986, for full implementation in 1987, represents a clear model of a policy designed to accommodate the self-interests of broadcasters and advertisers yet couched in the discourse of state intervention for the public interest. The kernel of the policy (and the one which has prompted the most media attention with headlines like 'CRTC Gets Tough') is the *mandatory compliance* to guidelines on sex-role stereotyping which was made compulsory for all broadcasters as a condition of licence renewal. However, what is not usually addressed in the discussion about this regulation is the source of the infamous guidelines, 'The Broadcasting Industry's Self-Regulatory Code on Sex-Role Stereotyping'. The CRTC adopted the CAB's *own* voluntary code and left it to broadcasters and advertisers to revise the rules by which they will be judged, a curious move to say the least. As Susan Crean Noted:

> Just why the CRTC thought it would be a smart move to have the wolves design a security system for the farmyard is an interesting question [Crean, 1987, p.7].

Aside from asking broadcasters and advertisers to add definitions to particular terms in their existing guidelines and to create new guidelines in specific areas (such as rock videos), the old voluntary framework was essentially left intact. The other elements to the policy statement had primarily to do with a continuation of the process of educational and industry sensitisation, a commitment to increase the appointment of female Commissioners to the CRTC, a call for an improved complaint mechanism strategy and a promise for further monitoring of industry performance by the CRTC.

It is interesting to note the recommendations made by various women's organisations during the public hearings which were *not* included in the policy statement: to review and revise the existing guidelines in a *public forum* and to also apply those guidelines to specialty channels and purchased foreign programming, to provide a penalty mechanism for failure to adhere to guidelines, to include specific guidelines on pornographic material, to change the CRTC hearing structure in order to increase the role of the public and, most importantly, to require licensees to implement employment equity programmes.

One quickly begins to see the limits to the state's capacity to incorporate feminism. As long as the political discourse is centred on a strategy of increasing or decreasing the measured number of tabulated images in discrete, manifest categories, the state is willing to intervene in a quasi-directive manner. But when the discourse begins to shift, as it did during the 1986 public hearings, to question more fundamentally the structure of power relations, then the state is less able and less eager to incorporate the feminist agenda. For example, the demand for employment equity clauses as a condition of licence threw into question the

organisation of gendered labour hierarchies and the overall marginalisation of women in media production. The call for a democratisation of the CRTC rule-making processes, whereby images are deemed acceptable or unacceptable, challenged an embedded regulatory process which favours the voices and input of industry representatives. Finally, the request that preclearance mechanisms be developed and extended to foreign programming posed a threat to the routine practice of increasing audience viewing through the purchase of relatively cheap but popular American productions. All three of these critical demands are ignored in the current sex-role stereotyping policy and in the ongoing debates about state regulation of gendered images.

It is in this context that we can read the recent actions of the CRTC. It has essentially reiterated the liberal feminist programme for change: educate, persuade, increase visibility and thereby create new points of entry into power. The only ones who win in this game are advertisers and broadcasters, who know that periodic gestures of concern will satisfy a regulatory body which has *never* seriously enforced promises in licence renewal decisions, and quantitative social scientists who can expect regular contracts from both government and industry to carry out content analyses *ad infinitum*.

There are several lessons from this experience for feminist political strategy. To put a positive face on it, the state has in recent years been placed in the situation of at least having to deal with feminism. As noted by R.W. Connell:

> The state has been obliged to negotiate over demands across a broad front, and grapple with problems of legitimacy... [Connell, 1988, p.27].

Where feminism is at risk is in the attempts (and successes) of the state to reorganise our political discourse, to recast our demands into manageable politics and hence to mask the real issues. We need to rethink our strategies in the area of cultural politics by rethinking the whole question of gendered images as they relate to other social discourses. In other words as long as we focus *exclusively* on the images of women we will miss the more critical point of their interrelation to other cultural practices and meanings. But this also requires that we address the interaction of forms of culture and structures of production. Otherwise we fall into the trap of theorising a cultural politics on the basis of an incomplete understanding of the infrastructural imperatives of cultural production.

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