



## **CABLE TELEVISION'S SOCIOCULTURAL IMPACT DIFFICULT TO ASSESS**

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### *1. Cable television technology*

Cable television technology has developed continuously in Canada over a period of years and has become a genuine industry. Attracting new markets from year to year, the cabled population increased in Quebec by 6% between 1986 and 1987. Penetration rates now total 58% in Quebec showing a 7% lag compared to the rest of Canada. To examine some hypotheses concerning the sociocultural impact of this new technology, we studied its installation on the Île d'Orléans, which received cable in 1987.

### *2. Ile d'Orléans*

Île d'Orléans was singled out for this study for a number of reasons: 5 out of 6 municipalities on the island were to be cabled, furnishing us with one control village for the duration of the survey. In addition, we were able to gather data before installation began.

Moreover, before the advent of cable, this region was poorly served by television. Residents had access to four French channels: a private one (Pathonic), an educational one (Radio-Québec), a public one (Radio-Canada) and since 1986 another private channel (Quatre Saisons). One English public channel (CBC) was also available.

Furthermore the geographic position and sociocultural mix of its inhabitants make the island an interesting microcosm. The island is located 20km from Quebec City, in the St. Lawrence River, and is linked to the mainland by a bridge. Its

population of 6775 is scattered in an essentially agricultural territory, which measures 34 km long by 8 km wide.

The population is divided into two groups: indigenous families who have inhabited the island for generations, some since the start of the colony. They represent 40% of the population. And urban dwellers from Quebec City who are attracted by the quality of life, low population density, and the community spirit on the island.

### 3. *Our working hypotheses*

Our research on the socio-cultural impact of cable was based on two premises. First, that the introduction of cable in a given community will be similar to the changes brought about by the introduction of new channels on traditional television. Secondly, that the resulting changes vary from one place to another, and thus may show contradictory results.

A comparison of previous English TV research by Tannis MacBeth Williams (1986) in British Columbia and French language TV by Caron (1983) in Quebec, as well as work by Barnes (1983) in Newfoundland and Pfetsch and Kutteroff (1988) in Germany show that the addition of TV channels brings various changes. These depend on the individuals involved and the environment in which they live. No uniform model has been devised to account for the impact of new television channels. Moreover, the interpretations of the results of these studies seem to be diametrically opposed.

Previously assumed differences in audience reception characteristics between TV and cable were not borne out because both technologies are simply different vehicles for the same content. The marvelous TV "à la carte" promised by cable is also available through the satellite dish. Surveys therefore show that adding new channels merely gave the viewer a chance to view more of the same type of programs instead of diversifying his or her choice.

Contradictory results have been established as to the socio-demographic profile of cable users, and their behaviour and attitudes. For example Henke *et al.* (1984), Barnes (1983) & Bouchard (1985) found cable subscribers younger than non-subscribers, but with a higher level of income. For their part, Sparkes (1983) & Collins *et al.* (1983) discovered that those with lower incomes become cable subscribers.

Another set of contradictory results were found with respect to the question whether cable subscribers were more likely be "heavy" or "light" viewers. The Groupe de recherche en information de l'est du Québec (GRIDEQ 1981) noted such a correlation in a Montreal suburb (Longueuil), whereas in Rimouski, this correlation did not exist. Collins *et al.* (1983) found in Michigan that cable

subscribers also had a lower rate of TV consumption than non-subscribers. Bouchard (1985), in his turn, discovered that the greatest TV consumers were those cable subscribers who owned a converter, yet non-subscribers watched TV more than those without a converter.

These conflicting data lead us to hypothesize that it is not cable television *per se* which affects people, but the kind of environment in which individuals find themselves. It is this environment which determines how cablevision is adapted. Consequently sociocultural impact must be sought as much in the needs of the individuals and their profile, as in the effects of technology as such.

#### 4. *The survey*

The research has two phases: first, a survey of the TV viewing habits and social behaviour of the inhabitants before cable installation in 1987; second a follow up study in 1990, three years after the introduction of cable.

In the first phase, BBM administered its classic survey in February 1987 sampling 1200 people in the six villages, to verify the theory of "TV abundance" (Defleur and Dennis 1981). More than 800 questionnaires were filled out. In the five villages which were to be cabled, half of these were sent to individuals interested in eventually subscribing to cable and the other half to those who did not initially indicate a wish to subscribe. In the sixth cable-free village, questionnaires were distributed at random.

During the summer of 1987, three months after cable was introduced, a series of interviews with target groups were undertaken to expand the BBM data. Included in these groups were men and women with and without cable; rural and urban inhabitants as well as young people. Some 60 persons were questioned, namely eight groups of about eight people each. Discussion bore on three themes: living on the island, attitude towards TV and perception of cable television. At the end of each interview, questionnaires were administered in which a number of factual questions were asked, and extent of adherence to traditional values were gauged.

#### 5. *Research findings of the BBM questionnaires.*

The average time people watched television during our survey was 27.4 hours a week, which was exactly the same amount of time spent by Quebec City residents according to the 1987 spring report. The Island population must then be compared with the city rather than the rural viewers.

People who wanted cable viewed television 2 hours a week (28.5 hours vs 26.6 hours) more than those who had not made up their mind.

Even though 20% of the residents said they were bilingual, they spent only 2% of their television time viewing the only english channel.

Children 7 to 11 from cabled families view TV 4.65 hours a week more than those from non cabled homes. The 18-24 year olds view 5 hours more. But the 60 and over age group reversed these trends. The non cabled viewed 4 hours more than the cabled.

Education also affects cable viewing. The highest weekly viewing is among cable subscribers with grade school education, 34 hours. They are followed by non-cabled households with some high school education, 31 hours.

Occupation too is an important predictor. Cabled farm people viewed TV almost 9 h/w more (35.3) than the non-cabled (26.7). Yet skilled trades non-cabled people viewed 10 h/w (29.3) more than those cabled.

Household size affects cable viewing positively. In small households of 2 adults people viewed less TV (27.4). In one or 3 adult households TV viewing was 31 hours. The more children there are in the house, the more they looked at TV. And they looked more at TV when the head of family is a woman (1.75 h/w more).

One family out of two had a VCR. But families with VCR's viewed TV less (2 h/w) than those who don't own one.

It is evident from these results that the profile of those who want cable is very different from those who have not yet decided. It is difficult to predict whether the latter will change their minds and opt for cable.

#### 6. *Research Findings from The Interviews: Television as "intrusive" Technology.*

Our interviews discovered that inhabitants of the Ile d'Orléans consider their world as basically good in opposition to the outer world. The bridge and the river symbolize the break between these two worlds: the positive world of the island and the negative world represented by the city. People felt that the island is a genuine universe where one can live in safety, in contact with nature and respectful of the environment. The city, in contrast represents an artificial atmosphere, in which promiscuity, veiled threats and street rhythms ignore the "real necessities of life". Hence the idea of privilege, not only the privilege of living in pleasant surroundings, but the privilege of knowing the real value of things is felt by the island dwellers. In this context, those in the other world are viewed as living in delusion.

To live on the Ile means to have a "special" mentality. As a matter of fact, the island mentality applies to newcomers as well as to those born there. It is demonstrated by a desire to live close to nature, locked in a secure world with awareness of tradition and the past, the reassuring presence of a river, and the -

deep-seated desire to stroll around the island at least once a year. If newcomers adopt this mentality, it is probably because they share the same vision.

At the same time, urban newcomers believe that "the locals" of old stock are annoyed by their presence. This is not the case. The locals make no distinction between natives and newcomers. In fact, when you look deeper, locals feel vested with a legitimacy they do not recognize in outsiders. Locals "possess" the Ile, while the non-locals only derive benefits from it.

Conversations about television revealed that its greatest fault was its seductiveness. People said it was so easy that one gets taken in and is prevented from attending to a thousand other and more "productive" enterprises. TV thus is identified with idleness, passivity and an easy-going life-style. In short, one is overcome with guilty feelings about it. More constructive things are work, action, in short, resisting temptation. The fact that television is popular because it provides pleasure is not admitted. Instead, it is extolled for its educational and information value. It is granted that there are good things on TV (otherwise how can one justify watching it), but the spectator must exert control so as not to fall under its magic spell.

Interviewers indicated that TV is a danger for others, but not for those who can exert control over it. Others become TV addicts, but not those like the speaker who have a sense of discipline. It is therefore held that discipline is needed to consume TV: choose broadcasts, keep set hours, control the children and the mate - the mate is always the one who spends more time with TV. The husband accuses his wife of plugging in on soap operas, and the wife notes that she cannot get him away from the sport broadcasts.

Other attitudes toward television smack of the judeo-christian tradition. For some viewers, watching the news becomes a way to dismiss the cognitive dissonance resulting from the fact of watching entertainment programs before the news. News watching becomes a form of compensation ritual which brings the spectator back to the "principle of reality" after being carried off by the "principle of pleasure". He can go to sleep in peace, his self-esteem is restored. "Listening to the news before bedtime, leaves the impression of duty accomplished."

All focus group members however view television as useful. It is part of everyday life and it would be difficult to do without it.

First and foremost, it is used as a source of information, next to learn something and last for entertainment. It is an opening on the world, a way of knowing what is going on while at the same time being entertained. Finally, it is a presence which makes one feel safe, which acts as a companion.

In spite of these general attitudes television is more often criticized than lauded. Though TV may not have established the trends for divorce and homosexuality, it certainly contributed to their development. Moreover, all adults spoke of the negative effects of TV on communication between the couple, the family members, friends and neighbors. TV breaks the ties of family and community and exerts a disastrous influence on children.

It has often been asserted that TV is totally integrated into modern life. Yet the discrepancies between attitudes and behaviours indicate that people are still experiencing difficulty fitting TV into their life-styles. TV is a source of contradictions which are resolved only by the efforts of reasoning and justification. Discussions about it leads to emotional dissonances. Even heavy viewers admit that TV is not as interesting as claimed. These attitudes are unique to television and distinguish it from other technologies like the automobile, household appliances and micro-computers.

Our preliminary findings suggest that cable television is first and foremost viewed as a means of access to traditional TV content, with better reception qualities and more channels. Specific benefits from cable now or in the future are ignored or rejected. And no one believes in the famous TV "à la carte" with its content variety that was dreamed about 15 years ago.

Some people subscribe to cable for fear of missing shows other people are watching. They view it as an enhanced value of a technology they already possess. Yet they are a minority. The non-cabled feel the existing choice is adequate because videocassette permit the storing of interesting programs taped by relatives.

The majority of the focus group members feel that cable has not brought the expected gratifications. The promise of choice has not been realized and even if choice and better quality shows were available, there is not enough time to watch them. Other uses of cable such as the possibility for home shopping are not accepted. For the people of the island, shopping means going out, seeing things and touching them. It is, as it were, an escape from everyday routine. We found people in general skeptical, or indifferent to the future possibilities of the new technology, because these interactive options are at present too uncertain.

## NOTES

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