

Canada and U.S. Differences in Similar TV Story Content

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The content of popular television shows reflect the cultural myths and values which support the popular culture of a country. Harold Schechter has shown how the ancient gods of Olympus appear nightly on United States television.¹ Horace Newcomb has pointed out that television is a "crucially important object of study not only because it is a new 'form,' a different 'medium,' but because it brings its massive audience into a direct relationship with particular sets of values and attitudes."²

The values and attitudes, which the writers, directors, producers can only get from their own culture are "submerged", according to Newcomb, "in the contexts of dramatic presentation."³ Newcomb has proceeded to analyze the values presented in each type of television programming content. He has shown how these values are presented in the character type portrayed in each form of programming, the patterns of action in each, and the physical environment of the program.

This type of analysis is closely akin to the analysis undertaken by Claude Levi-Strauss in Anthropology, the folklorist Pierre Maranda, and literary critics such as Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood.⁴ Only recently with the seminal work of Horace Newcomb, James Taylor⁵ and others has this type of analysis focused upon the cultural myths which support the content of television programs.

*Attitudes,
Values of the
Writers in TV*

Since, as Newcomb argues, the attitudes and values possessed by the writers are embedded in their television product, it is reasonable to argue that Canadian television writers will put different values into their programming content. Viewers in Canada will understand fully the values and myths which support Canadian television content but not fully comprehend content produced in other cultures.

Tate and Surlin⁶ have shown that Canadian television viewers do not understand, or enjoy, the television show, All In The Family, because the content of the program is embedded in a culture different from the one in which they

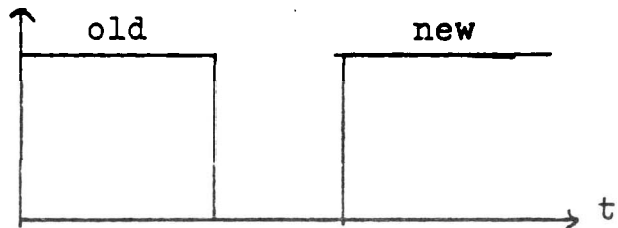
live. Similarly Canadian viewers do not perceive as much humor in All In The Family because the jokes depend upon an understanding of United States culture which Canadian viewers do not possess. One must live in the culture, being totally involved in it, in order to fully comprehend the television humor which arises from it.

Seymour Lipset⁷ has long argued that each of the English speaking democracies is founded upon a different value system. Supporting evidence for this is found in research done with the Rokeach Value Survey by Rokeach in the United States and Canada, and Feather in Australia.⁸ Respondents in each culture emphasize different values as being most important. Americans tend to focus upon the values of Equality and Freedom. Australians emphasize the values of friendship and companionship. Canadians are more apt to emphasize values relating to peace of mind and tranquility.

*Absolutist
And Gradualist
Change Models*

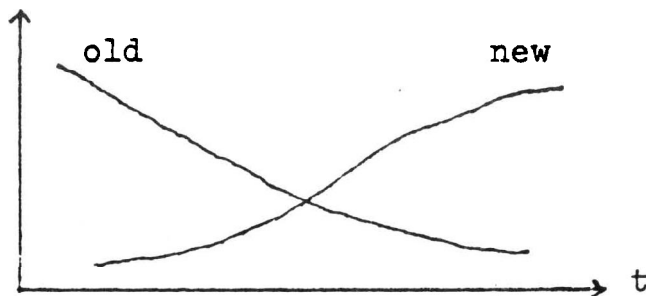
A study of Canadian and United States history will further support the proposition that each national culture is based upon different attitudes and values. Galtung⁹ has delineated two essential models of social change. The first is the Absolutist-Revolutionary model. Under this model it is understood that social change must be abrupt and drastic. The old order must be completely destroyed before the new order is instituted. There may even be a period of chaos between the time in which the old order ends and the new order is begun.

Absolutist
Position



The Gradualist model, or public opinion model, suggests a different type of social change. In this type of change the old order is allowed to gradually run down as it is replaced by the new order. Thus there is stability and order as one type of life is replaced by another.

Gradualist
Position



Each of these models has implications for the society which implements them.

These modes of orientation are well known. On the one hand there stands the advocate of "everything now"--everything or nothing, now or never--on the other hand stands the advocate of "something later." The former will say that we have to do it all at once to produce a real effect, that the old and the new orders are completely incompatible, that change to be real must be absolute change. The latter will say that change to be real must be real, and whether it is or not is an empirical problem solved by proceeding gradually, experimentally. More important than this, however, is the total rejection of the status quo by the absolutist, as contrasted with the gradualists only partial rejection. The absolutist works with black and white, the gradualists with shades of gray...The absolutist abolishes the old system and establishes the new overnight; for the gradualist it is a question of the decline of the old and rise of the new as the new "proves itself." The absolutist will not tolerate the ambivalence implied when two social orders, deduced from incompatible ideologies, coexist. For the gradualist coexistence will be an empirical, not an ideological problem and he will be better trained for tolerance of the ambivalence of the real world.¹⁰

*Revolutionary
Is Moralistic,
Rests on Dogma*

Galtung has also shown that each of these models find its expression in an intellectual style: the absolutist using deductive, moralistic arguments based upon dogmas to arrive at conclusions concerning society, the gradualist using an intellectual style of inductive reasoning from pragmatic, means-end hypotheses.

Historically these two models of social change have been juxtaposed against each other. Martin Luther possessed a gradualist pragmatic stance for social change during the Reformation in opposition to Carlstadt's absolutist methods for social change.¹¹ The founding fathers of the United States utilized an absolutist perspective. **The old order** was destroyed during the Revolutionary War. In 1781 when the war ended a period of chaotic change began under the Articles of Confederation. Then in 1789 the United States Constitution was implemented and the new federal government came into being bringing stability to the country.

In Canada, however, one finds the gradualist model of social change. The old order was very gradually replaced by the new. **No war or revolution was fought. No sudden break with the British Empire was demanded.** Rather in 1867

the old order had been changed enough to allow for the institution of the new Dominion of Canada. It was not until the mid-Twentieth Century that Canada obtained from Great Britain the right to have her own ambassadors and make her own treaties. In 1978 Queen Elizabeth II is Queen of Canada. **The House of Commons is opened each session by the Queen or her representative, the Governor General of Canada.** Symbols of royal power, such as the mace, are still carried into the House of Commons and play an important role in its ritual. **One hundred years after confederation one still finds parts of the old order present in Canadian society.**

These historical events and the models of social change which support them still govern thought in the United States and Canada. Robert Hess when reporting upon the results of his survey of political attitudes among school children has noted that the absolutist model of social change was the predominate one taught in U.S. schools.¹² He has even suggested that the problems confronting U.S. campuses during the late 1960's arose because students only knew one mode of social change. After long indoctrination in an absolutist perspective of social change, students were not willing to await gradual change on the campus.

These perspectives upon social change which arise from the historical process will be reflected in the stories which are prepared for television dramatization. **It is true that one cannot study television shows by examining the psychology of the writers since most are a product of many authors working together in collective collaboration.** "To study television," says T.W. Adorno, "in terms of the psychology of the authors would almost be tantamount to studying Ford cars in terms of the psychoanalysis of the late Mr. Ford."¹³ However it is possible to study television shows in terms of the cultural myths represented in the program content. **A show produced in one culture by authors raised in that culture should, and will, reflect different cultural norms than a show produced in another culture by persons imbued with that culture.**

*Compares Sidestreet
With Streets of
San Francisco*

Occasionally two television programs produced in different cultures will share a common plot. This happened several years ago with the Canadian program Sidestreet, a police drama set in Toronto, and the U.S. program, Streets of San Francisco. Differences do exist between Canadian and U.S. police dramas. In U.S. police drama the policemen work on only one case at a time, are almost superhuman in their physical and mental powers, and use more physical force than may be necessary. Canadian police shows, on the other hand, have little physical violence but a great deal of psychological violence.

Police in Canadian shows are involved in several cases at the same time and possess no superhuman attributes.¹⁴

When the 1977-1978 television season began last September two programs, one Canadian and one U.S., again used the same plot. Both were adventure programs with the action revolving around a central group of people who have to solve crises with physical activity. The United States program, Bionic Woman, opened its season with a two hour program featuring Max the Bionic Dog. The Canadian program, Search and Rescue, also featured an animal who is saved by the heroine. An examination of the differences in the two plot developments will illustrate the cultural assumptions of myths which underlie each production.

The Plot

In this particular story the plot revolves around an animal which has been mistreated by a cruel trainer. The trainer has subjected the animal to abuse with fire. Consequently the animal is now afraid of fire and attempts to attack any human who uses fire in its presence.

The animal is introduced to the heroine who takes pity upon it. The heroine attempts to save the animal by retraining. Much of the program is given over to these attempts at retraining the animal. Finally the heroine and animal arrive at a mutual understanding. The heroine is able to take the animal from its cage.

The heroine is caught in a fire and must be rescued. The heroine cannot help herself because she has been hurt or is unconscious. Overcoming his fear of fire, the animal leaps through the flames and brings help to save the heroine. The animal is now cured and continues to enjoy life with the heroine.

The United States Version - The Bionic Woman

Scientists at O.S.I. headquarters believe that Max the Bionic Dog is rejecting his bionic components. This is the only explanation that they can arrive at to explain his erratic and unruly behavior. Jaime Summers, the Bionic Woman, is introduced to Max to see if she can assess the problem. Jaime is also concerned because she believes that the same thing might happen to her body in the future. **She wants** to save Max because it is important to her self-understanding.

Jaime is allowed to help Max. Dr. Rudy Wells has deter-

mined that Max must be destroyed immediately. Jaime rebels against this authority by taking Max outside for exercise. While demonstrating that Max has become unruly because he needs exercise, Jaime is surprised when Max tries to attack the man who has been caring for him. She does not realize that Max is only reacting to the lit match which the man was using to light a cigarette. Dr. Wells uses this experience to reaffirm his diagnosis that Max must be put to sleep.

Jaime again frees Max and takes him to the home of her parents. Here she continues to work with Max. Finally Rudy Wells and Oscar arrive at Jaime's home to reclaim the dog. Max becomes frightened by a fire which Jaime's father builds in the fireplace and escapes through a window. Jaime follows him. **Together they ride on a truck to a Northern community where they can hide with a friend who is a forest ranger.**

Jaime and Max find shelter in the forest. They work together as Max grows stronger. Suddenly a forest fire begins. Jaime becomes trapped in the fire. Max must now overcome his fear of fire in order to save Jaime. Max does come to her rescue. Rudy and Oscar are now convinced that Max is not rejecting his bionics. He is allowed to live because of his heroism.

The Canadian Version - Search and Rescue

*Flee From Father
Or Work With Dad*

A lion from a circus arrives at the Alpha ranch to be destroyed. It has become unmanageable. The circus owners have given the lion to a veterinarian who turns him over to the Alpha Team. Katy decides that she will try to work with the lion and retrain him.

Katy's father advises her on how to retrain the lion. He is with her as she works. It becomes apparent to the Alpha team that the lion is afraid of fire. Katy works patiently with the lion under the guidance of her father.

Katy and the lion are walking about the compound. The lion has become very trusting of Katy and obeys her commands. Katy goes into the barn with the lion where she climbs a ladder to get some feed. **The ladder slips and Katy falls injuring her head.** The ladder also tips over a lantern which begins a fire in hay stored in the barn. The lion goes outside where he attracts the attention of the other members of the Alpha team. **They rescue Katy and put out the fire.** The lion becomes a working member of the search and

rescue team. Katy's confidence in the lion has been proven to be correct.

Comparison of the Two Programs

Four major theme differences are apparent in the treatment given the plot by the different writers. First, there is the superhero myth. Secondly, the different perspectives upon social change. Thirdly, there is the environment in which the action takes place. Fourthly, one can examine the individualism of the characters which leads one to take matters into their own hands and solve the problem.

First, in the United States version the heroine is a superbeing. She has powers which no other human being possesses. Jaime Summers stands in the tradition of U.S. folk heroes who are larger than life, e.g., Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, Johnny Appleseed, Mike Fink, Superman, and Wonder Woman. Unlike the others of an earlier historic period in the U.S., Jaime is the product of American technology. Henry Steel Commager has pointed out that a part of the American character lies in the practical efficiency of U.S. business and technology. Jaime Summers is a true product of this part of American life.

Machinery
vs Education

What all this suggests is that the American has faith in machinery, admires bigness, is inclined to mistake the effort for the product and to judge the product by the effort--and the cost. This is natural enough in a people whose genius is inventive, who enjoy abundance, who delight in quantity, and who have learned to rely upon machinery to do work ordinarily done by people.¹⁵

On the other hand, the Canadian heroine is quite ordinary. She is in her late teens. She works closely with her father. She has skill in working with animals but she relies upon her father for experience and advice. She is the consequence of a carefully prepared training and educational program not modern technology.

The second area in which the two stories differ is in the attitude towards social change as reflected in their treatment of authority. Jaime Summers is forced to rebel against the authority of Rudy Wells and Oscar. They are determined to destroy Max the Bionic Dog. They will not listen to reason or any alternative explanations of Max's problem. Jaime must take the dog secretly. There is no way in which she can work through established channels of control.

In order to save Max's life, Jaime must rebel against those who have authority over her. She makes a clean break from it. A period of hiding, flight, and uncertainty exist before the new order can be brought into being with Max's salvation. Jaime Summers makes a total rejection of the status quo since she is unable to change it. There are only shades of black and white--Max either dies or lives. No other alternative is considered. Dr. Rudy Wells has scientifically determined that there is no possible way to save Max. There are no neutral positions between the two extremes. The Bionic Woman is written from an absolutist perspective. **The authorities are wrong but they are determined Max will die.** Jaime has no alternative but to flee with the dog.

In Search and Rescue there is no rebellion from authority. Indeed the authority figures, Katy's father and the veterinarian, help her retrain the lion. Katy works closely with the authorities. Instead of incompatibility and failure in communication, Katy and her father are compatible and experience effective communication. A pragmatic, empirical approach is taken towards the lion. There is no sudden recovery but a gradual change in the behavior of the frightened animal. The status quo is accepted and gradually a change takes place.

*Frontier Symbol
Mingled With
Escape Theme*

The third element in which the two stories differ lies in the environment in which the action takes place. Jaime Summers must flee from the headquarters of O.S.I. to her own home and finally the forest. She cannot deal with the conflict in the home environment but must find a new environment where she can work upon the problem concerning her.

Margaret Atwood has pointed out that escape is a major theme of literature in the United States. While she admits that this is a generalization, Atwood argues that the Frontier is a dominant aspect of U.S. literature. Accompanying this theme is the theme of escape.

I'd like to begin with a sweeping generalization and argue that every country or culture has a single unifying and informing symbol at its core...The symbol, then--be it word, phrase, idea, image, or all of these--functions like a system of beliefs (it is a system of beliefs, though not a formal always a formal one) which holds the country together and helps the people in it to cooperate for common ends. Possibly the symbol for America is The Frontier, a flexible idea that contains many elements dear to the American heart: it suggests a place that is new, where the old order can be

*discarded...; a line that is always expanding, taking in or "conquering" everfresh virgin territory...; it holds out a hope, never fulfilled but always promised, of Utopia, the perfect human society.*¹⁶

Historically the fascination of Americans with the Frontier has fostered the belief that in the "new world" solutions would be found for problems under the old order. The Pilgrims, Puritans, came to this continent to escape tyranny in Europe. In the New World they solved their problems by creating a new environment in which to live. Similarly Jaime Summers and Max flee to a new environment, the forest, in which they can work out a solution to their problem.

In Search and Rescue the Alpha Team stays home where they solve their problem with the lion. There is no need for a new environment or escape from authority. All action takes place in the same environmental setting.

Again Margaret Atwood argues that the dominant theme, or central symbol, for Canada is survival. The Canadian dilemma is how to survive in face of "hostile elements... carving out a place and a way of keeping alive."¹⁷ How to survive in face of a crisis or disaster.

*Survival Is
Symbol For
Canada*

*But the main idea is the first one: hanging on, staying alive...Our central idea is one which generates, not the excitement and sense of adventure or danger which the Frontier holds out, not the smugness and/or sense of security, of everything in its place, which the Island can offer, but an almost intolerable anxiety. Our stories are likely to be tales not of those who made it but of those who made it back, from the awful experience...*¹⁸

Search and Rescue does appear to fall into this traditional Canadian symbol. Each week some human being meets some crisis and is brought out with the combined efforts of human trainer and animal. These are stories of people who are brought out of disaster. Even the story of the lion is one of an animal which survives in face of the crisis of death.

Finally, Jaime Summers and Katy differ on their individuality. In this article on the American character Henry Steel Commager writes:

*Traditionally the American is an individualist, impatient of restrictions on his conduct or his personality. He is anti-authoritarian, dislikes rules, prefers to do things his own way, and wants to be left alone.*¹⁹

Jaime Summers certainly reflects this traditional characteristic of Americans. She is the individualist! She rebels against the authority of her superiors, is impatient with the restrictions which have been placed upon her interaction with Max, and finally runs away in order to study Max in her own way.

Katy, however, never questions the restrictions placed upon her conduct by her father. She patiently follows his advice while working with the lion. She trusts authority. She realizes that she does not know enough to do the job alone. Retraining the lion, while carried out by Katy, is a team affair. It is accomplished not by individual effort but by the entire family working as a team.

That Katy demonstrates such characteristics will not surprise Canadian viewers. Historically all Canadian revolutions have failed. Canadian authors do not create the traditional individual hero. As Atwood, Frye, and others point out, Canadian literature, especially native tradition, "is not in the direction of individual heroes at all, but rather in the direction of collective heroes."²⁰ The television show, Search and Rescue, is very typical of Canadian emphasis upon collective heroes instead of individual stars.

*Lone Heroes
Replaced By
Collective Ones*

Conclusion

Newcomb has delineated an important area of mass communication for analysis cross-culturally. Comparison of two shows produced in different cultures but utilizing the same plot can be helpful in seeking to understand cultural differences. It can also be useful when seeking to predict the reception of one program in a different culture.

The program content of television reflects the cultural attitudes and values of its producers. Shows produced in the United States often revolve around superheroes who possess wisdom and strength not available to ordinary people. Even the police are portrayed as possessing super skills, e.g. the police in S.W.A.T. can scale large buildings in order to drop upon an escaping criminal. They jump up after their long fall with hardly a misplaced hair and certainly never any dirt upon their clothes. The Six Million Dollar Man, the Bionic Woman, and the Bionic Dog stand in this superhuman tradition. Their power comes not from their own skill or strength but is supplied to them by modern technology. They are symbolic of modern superpeople.

The traditional themes of United States literature of

escape, rebellion against authority, individualism, and a preference to do things "my way", also find their way into U.S. television drama. Private enterprise and "rugged individualism" were, and are, a part of the "American way of life." Steve Austin and Jaime Summers, while on the one hand products of corporate life, reassert their individualism by doing things their own way. Often in U.S. television programming the authorities are shown to be wrong. With all of their know-how and expertise Dr. Rudy Wells and Oscar are shown to be wrong because their technology makes them inhumane. Jaime Summers is the one who loves and protects Max the Bionic Dog. Thus Jaime Summers victory is a victory over the corporate technology which threatens the traditional American virtues of individualism and rebellion.

The historical experience of the American revolution with its accompanying model for social change gives an aura of absolutism to the content of U.S. television. Those in authority, e.g., Rudy Wells, are dogmatic, unable to grasp the deeper problems besetting Max the Bionic Dog. There is an either/or confrontation between Dr. Wells and Jaime. Both cannot be right in this matter. There is no thought of compromise or change.

*We Welcome
Authority,
Work Together*

The historical experience of Canadian society is quite different from society in the U.S. Canadians welcome the experience and stability of authority. It allows them to survive in a hostile environment of cold and storm. Pragmatic, gradual solutions are sought with people working together. There is no need to flee or escape to a new environment. Problems can be worked out here in the home environment if everyone cooperates.

The program Search and Rescue reflects these Canadian attitudes. Those persons who find themselves in danger during the program are only going about their daily activities. They may be pursuing a hobby or simply doing work which they do everyday. They are rescued through a team effort of animals and humans working together. There are no individual heroes. The Alpha Team is always cooperative with one another.

Given the differences in historical background, the differences in values which support the cultures, television programs produced in the United States will differ from those written and produced in Canada. The difference may not be apparent to the casual viewer but to the person who takes time to analyze the underlying values and cultural assumptions they will become apparent. Similarly given comparable production standards viewers in any culture will prefer programs which reflect their cultural values and myths.

FOOTNOTES

1. Harold Schechter, "Ancient Myths on TV," TV Book, edited by Judy Fireman. (New York: Workman Publishing Co., 1977,) pp. 374-375.
2. Horace Newcomb, "Toward a Television Aesthetic," The Critical View of Television. Edited by Horace Newcomb. (New York: The Oxford University Press, 1976) pp. 273-289.
3. op. cit., p. 274.
4. See especially Claude Levi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology. (New York: Basic Books, 1967) Pierre Maranda, editor, Mythology: Selected Readings. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972) Northrop Frye, The Bush Garden: Essays on The Canadian Imagination. (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1971) Margaret Atwood, Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature. (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 1972).
5. James Taylor, "Television Crime Drama: A Mythological Interpretation," in Violence in Television Films and News. Report of the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 1977) III:159-219.
6. Eugene D. Tate and Stuart H. Surlin, "Agreement with Opinionated TV Characters Across Culture," Journalism Quarterly, 1976, 53, 2, 199-203; 210. See also Stuart H. Surlin and Eugene D. Tate, "All In The Family: Is Archie Funny?", The Journal of Communication, 1976, 26, 4, 61-68.
7. S.M. Lipset, "The Value Patterns of Democracy: A Case Study in Comparative Analysis," American Sociological Review, 1963, 28, 515-531.
8. Milton Rokeach. The Nature of Human Values. (New York: The Free Press, 1973.) pp. 89-93.
9. Johan Galtung, "Foreign Policy Opinion as a Function of Social Position," in J. Rosenau, editor, International Politics and Foreign Policy. (New York: The Free Press, 1969) pp. 551-572.
10. Galtung, op. cit., p. 556.
11. Eugene D. Tate, Martin Luther As A Spiritual Director. (Evanston: Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Northwestern University, 1962).
12. Robert D. Hess, "Political Attitudes In Children," Psychology Today, 1969, 2, 8, 24-29.
13. T.W. Adorno, "Television and the Patterns of Mass Culture," in Television: The Critical View. Horace Newcomb editor. (New York: The Oxford University Press, 1976). p. 251.
14. While it is impossible to analyze the comparable story treatments of Sidestreet and Streets of San Francisco due to an inability to obtain tapes of shows broadcast in previous years, an analysis of United States and Canadian police shows is reported in Eugene D. Tate, "Viewer Perception of Selected Television Programs," Vulnerability to Media Effects. Report of the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry. (Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario 1977). VI:284-401.
15. Henry Steele Commager, "Portrait Of The American," reprinted in College English: The First Year. Wise, Congleton, Morris, and Hodges, editors. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1952). p. 171
16. Margaret Atwood, op. cit., p. 31. 17. Atwood, op. cit., p. 32.
18. idem., p. 33. 19. Commager, op. cit., p. 175. 20. Atwood, op. cit., p. 172.