

# A Case History of Bilingual Telecasting in Canada

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This paper discusses methods of operation and special problems of TV broadcasting to French- and English-speaking audiences in Canada.

IN CANADA, bilingual telecasting is far beyond the wishing stage: it is a daily affair. In 1867, the Fathers of the Confederation decided that two languages would be official in Canada: English and French. Hence, the national broadcasting body, which is responsible to Parliament, simply has to operate accordingly.

Canada has a population of 16,500,000 people, of which 5,000,000 are French speaking, mainly in the Province of Quebec. At the beginning of TV — that is, 5 years ago — it was decided that the first stations in Montreal, Ottawa and Quebec City would carry programs both in English and French.

## Initiation and Development

Let's consider the Montreal case, which was typical of one station that has to serve a two-language audience. Since French Canadians account for some 70% of the population in the area, the rule was: two-thirds of the programs in French and one-third in English. That looked like a fair deal. But not to the viewers!

French Canadians as a group are sensitive about the language question and anxious to preserve their native tongue. They felt that regular English programs presented on "their" channel was an intrusion into their homes. Their reaction became more violent when the proportion of English on the daily menu jumped to 50%. This of course was due to the availability of many Toronto and New York programs and the difficulty, at that pioneering period, of producing a great number of programs in the French language.

On the other hand, the English part of the audience, even with this relatively generous 50-50 treatment, did not quite understand why they could not have a full schedule in their own language. Numerous demands were coming from both sides, and the CBC soon announced the opening of a second station in Montreal, all English. The original one was to be converted to French. The same story could be told of Ottawa and

Quebec City, where bilingualism is now taken care of by two separate stations.

The initial system of one bilingual station, however, pleased some discriminating people. When the second station was announced in Montreal, Dr. Cyril James, Principal of McGill University, stated sadly: "This is the worst thing that could happen. We were starting to learn French!"

There still remain some bilingual stations in Canada: three in English and three in French areas. "Bilingual" is being used here for any amount of programs in the other language: in some instances, this is not more than two hours a week, and in others it goes up to 25% of air time.

There are today 42 TV stations in Canada, of which 36 are primarily English and 6 primarily French. An engineer will appreciate what this represents — the setting up of two separate networks, in a country as wide as the U.S.A., for a population ten times smaller. And still the United States has only three networks. The rate of TV expansion in Canada has been the fastest anywhere. Eighty-six per cent of the population is covered today, and this was achieved within five years.

## Network Problems

As far as programs are concerned, bilingual telecasting creates two sets of problems, instead of one. Both networks wish to retain a Canadian identity, by producing original shows. But while the English network can tap the immense reservoir of American programs to supplement its own production, the French network has not much of a choice and is practically compelled to produce its own fare of genuine TV shows. The result is as follows: on the English side, 63% of the programs are Canadian-produced, and 37% are U.S.A., with other English sources supplying less than 1%. (You will note that the U.S. portion is selected among the best of the three sources: NBC, CBS, ABC.)

On the French side, there is no big supplier in the neighborhood: CBC studios produce up to 80% of the French network output, films from France accounting largely for the remainder. Since CBC-TV operates from

mid-afternoon to midnight, it will be no surprise for you to learn that Montreal now stands first in the world among TV centers of French language, and that Montreal and Toronto are second only to New York and Hollywood as far as live TV production is concerned.

These two networks, actively operating, are a permanent demonstration of bilingual telecasting in one country. At times, the same programs are being fed to both networks. For the third summer, this was done in the case of the half-hour show, *Serenade for Strings*. The technique is quite simple: the host is bilingual and makes his announcements first in English and then in French, or the reverse. The songs are selected from both language repertoires. In this way the whole country is subjected to bilingualism. Another series similarly broadcast is *The Concert Hour*. Its new season debut, in September, was a two-hour live production of Gounod's opera *Faust*, sung in French. A special musical program, a *Salute to Queen Elizabeth*, originated partly in English from Toronto and partly in French from Montreal, with a bilingual hostess.

## Reaction to Bilingual Operation

As a whole, the Canadian public seems to go for this type of bilingual operation. Of course, there are a number of viewers who oppose any use of the other language on their sets. Once we did Puccini's *La Bohème* on *Concert Hour*, in the original Italian version. The CBC received complaints from English viewers who protested against "all that French singing" and from French viewers who urged us to "stop presenting those English programs"... That shows you how bilingual you can get!

Other big operations are conducted jointly by the two networks. For instance, Canada's General Elections, last June, were fully covered in both languages. CBC's pickup facilities at six major points throughout the country were used on an alternate basis, according to a preset schedule. Later in the evening the former Prime Minister, in Quebec City, and the newly elected Mr. Diefenbaker, in Regina, both addressed the Nation bilingually on a simulcast basis.

## Program Planning

Another formula, used for a weekly half-hour drama series called *The Plouffe Family*, consists of broadcasting live the French version on Wednesday night and the English version, live also, on Friday night. This has been going on success-

Presented on October 8, 1957, at the Society's Convention at Philadelphia by Jacques Landry, CBC-TV French Network, P.O. Box 6000, Montreal.

(This paper was received on October 9, 1957.)

fully for three years with the same script, same cast, same producer, same technical crew. The program has the top rating in French and is among the top 10 in English. One interesting aspect of this is that the French show attracts 9% of the English audience, and the English show 20% of the French audience. This is not the only case of looking at the other network. The French audience likes *Hitchcock*, *Studio One*, *Disneyland* and *Perry Como*, while the English audience likes *La Lutte* (that is, *Wrestling*, live) and a rural drama series, *Le Survenant* (translation, which has been published here, *The Outlander*). This habit of watching the opposite show may go too far, at least in the opinion of the Program Directors. In the Montreal area, *Toast of the Town* was winning the majority of TV homes. The French network decided to schedule, Sunday night at 8:00, its big variety show of the week. We feel sorry for Sullivan, but he lost out.

The program planning methods used for bilingual live shows apply also to TV films. One bilingual film product of the CBC is a 26-episode adventure series of the early Canadian explorer *Radisson*. The export version is called *Tomahawk*, and, to suit the taste in the United States, it has no cliff-hangers. Each episode was filmed first in French and then in English, with the same

bilingual actors, same director/producer, same crew. At least one series of documentary type, *Here and There*, dealing with various aspects of life in Canada, is produced for the two language groups. The basic scripts are the same, but the occasional interview is filmed in one language and then in the other.

#### Dubbing Operation

This leads us into the question of film dubbing, which is more frequent than the completely bilingual production. We do some of it locally. One example is the official French version of *Victory at Sea*, which is in the making in Montreal according to an agreement between NBC and CBC. Our experience is that documentaries are the type of films that lend themselves the most easily to translation. The big difficulties encountered are in drama films. It is not so much a question of technique — thanks to the engineers and to the translation experts. It is, broadly, a question of culture: will a certain series written in one language be suitable in another? Will it retain its flavor, its meaning, its value? I have in mind an American western TV film that was dubbed in Paris in Parisian French: it would be laughed at in the Province of Quebec, because it sounded so unbelievable. The attitude in these cases has to be a highly selective

one, based on the knowledge of the people for whom the dubbing is intended.

#### Conclusion

International television is already being practiced to some extent, and mention should be made of Canada's present part in it. The CBC exchanges programs with U.S. networks even if the trade balance is heavy in favor of the U.S.A. An interesting point is Canada's international cooperation in some live shows. The *Wide Wide World* program on the St. Lawrence Seaway contained a large Canadian portion requiring 19 cameras. During Queen Elizabeth's Tour in Canada and the United States, live programs were exchanged between the two countries. Certain TV programs are also circulated between Canada, England and Australia. One of the biggest cooperative efforts is the *Children's International Newsreel*, inspired by Eurovision. For this program, Canada exchanges bimonthly items with 14 countries. CBC-French also has imports from RTF (France), Télé-Luxembourg and Télé-Monte-Carlo. These are produced in cooperation with the CBC.

Bilingual telecasting in Canada has been highly successful. Let us hope that the same will be true of international television. It can be a splendid instrument to bring closer together nations and men everywhere.