Policy globalization and the “information society”: a view from Canada

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Abstract

The Canadian example suggests that recent shifts in communication policy frameworks should be understood as a transformation in how technology is organized politically, and not simply as a policy reaction to technological innovation. The process is tracked chronologically in three sections: institutional renewal (1993–1994); accelerated vertical slippage between national, regional and global policy levels (1995–1996); and horizontal dispersal of communication policy into new other sectors (1997). Across these stages, a series of convergences characterized by increased fluidity between territorial as well as sectoral jurisdictions are discussed; implications for the understanding of communication policy frameworks within the context of the “information society” project are identified. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Interoperable networks are often identified as key agents of media convergence. Recent developments in Canadian policy suggest that interoperable networks do not develop unaccompanied: they require interoperable policy environments, too. Between 1993 and 1997, the basic framework for Canadian communication policy shifted to accommodate the idea of Canada as part of an “information society” sprawling across the globe, not as a discrete geographical unit. In place of national policy-making, a global telecom and media policy regime is emerging. That process is the subject of this article.

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Jennifer Craik has argued that “choices in cultural policy are closely connected with the cultural traditions and governmental custom of different polities”, constraining the range of available policy frameworks (Craik, 1996). This is as relevant to communication policy as to cultural policy. But emerging global media regimes are exerting pressure on such “traditions and ... custom”. Squeezed between these, institutional redesign of media policy-making at the national level may occur such that it is less, not more adequately arranged to deal with convergence.

That dilemma permeates the recent history of Canada’s communication policy environment. Communication policy in Canada has always been heavily influenced by proximity to the United States. Now that proximity has become global. US policy directives were key agents behind the audiovisual trade and trade-in-services frameworks that began to lock into place in the 1990s, and those frameworks are basic to the interoperable communication policy framework emerging internationally.

What does global media policy look like? How can the notion of an emerging global regime be reconciled with the fact that nation-states remain the basic units of policy-making authority? It is hoped that the Canadian experience can be instructive for policy researchers and intervenors grappling with these questions. The process analysed here is tracked in three sections: the altering of Canadian communication policy-making’s institutional arrangements to integrate into the structures and strictures of new versions of an “information society” (1993–1994); accelerated slippage between national and global levels of policy-making (1995–1996); dispersal of communication policy itself into new areas of inquiry and of expertise (1997).


Canadian governance is shared between federal and provincial levels; most aspects of communication policy are, in Canada, under federal jurisdiction.\(^1\) From 1969 to 1993, the key communication policy body was the federal Department of Communication (DoC). During the summer of 1993, however, administrative reorganization resulted in quiet elimination of the DoC, delegating its responsibilities elsewhere. Many analysed the move as yet another ministerial shuffle\(^2\) — but the implications were wider. In examining the context and significance of this episode, we wish to demonstrate the roots of a communication governance redesign at odds with ongoing technological convergence, and suggest that this dissonance emerged from the attempt to reconcile national with global communication policy-making. As we shall see, elimination of the DoC would mark a transitional phase in the attempt to develop a state response to a global policy project. Its hallmarks would be uneven levels of citizen access to policy decisions, co-existence of regulation with other modes of policy intervention, and overlapping areas of jurisdiction that would require careful coordination.

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1 A 1931 Supreme Court of Canada decision, upheld in London, England by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council in 1932, placed radio broadcasting under the jurisdiction of the federal government. The controversial ruling set the stage for an ongoing series of federal–provincial conflicts.

2 See, in particular, Winsor, 1993.
2.1. Department of communication

The Department of Communication (DoC) was created as a new ministry in 1969, premissed upon coming convergence in the cultural industries, broadcasting, and telecommunications sectors. Its raison d’être was to bring communication technologies together with their content within the same framework, addressing what it saw as “two fundamental needs: the need to support Canadian culture as a cornerstone of national identity; and the need to ensure the orderly evolution of Canadian communications as key elements in the development of the economy and Canadian identity” (Skrzezewski, 1997). In 1971 a DoC task force, known as the Telecommission, forecast the growth of an information society and called for careful design of a national information infrastructure consistent with Canadian policy goals. The DoC was identified as the vehicle for implementing a Canadian information highway.\(^3\)

This under-one-roof concept took form gradually: jurisdiction over the medium, ranging from broadcast to space satellites, was enlarged in 1976 by entrusting the DoC-administered broadcast regulator, the Canadian Radio and Television Commission, with authority over telecommunication — it now became the Canadian Radiotelevision and Telecommunications Commission — while a larger role in cultural industries and arts and culture programmes juxtaposed medium with message. Industrial issues were in this manner brought into a setting whose policy calculus necessarily included the social implications of information technologies.

Potential should not be confused with achievement, however, nor institutional shuffling mistaken for political will. Created in the name of convergence, institutional change rarely filtered through to actual policy-making; earlier talk of “convergence” became little more than rhetoric occasionally colouring DoC pronouncements. Triggered by the DoC’s new jurisdiction over arts and culture programmes in 1980 and spurred on by the debates surrounding the Canada/US Free Trade Agreement (1984) and North American Free Trade Agreement (1988) these debates centred on audiovisual production and trade in services and, more broadly, Canadian cultural sovereignty — the cultural industries became the object of policy debate in the 1980s. This return to content, not carriage, as object of sociocultural contestation further prevented the DoC from implementing a unified convergence framework.\(^4\)

Indeed, by the time the excitement about the Internet promulgated by US policy-making initiatives and rhetoric filtered across the US/Canada border in the early 1990s, the Canadian administration’s attitude was one of anxiety over lagging behind — underscoring the significance of external policy inputs into the national communication policy process which only now would move forward on convergence. Announcement of a Canadian information infrastructure plan in February 1993, shortly before the Washington release of the NII Agenda for Action, lent new urgency to an ongoing ministerial turf war. The DoC’s preoccupation with content during the 1980s had enabled another ministry — Industry, Science and Technology Canada (ISTC), as it was

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\(^3\) For a fuller account of the early tabling of the Canadian information highway project, see Ostry (1993); and Raboy (1996).

\(^4\) Scope prevents fuller exposition of the DoC’s role in communication policy-making; further study can be found in Comor (1991).
then called — to siphon off influence in carriage issues. A behind-the-scenes battle for the lead on the information highway initiative was thrown into the blender of a 1993 ministerial shuffle. Elimination of the DoC was the result.

The shuffle created a new Department of Canadian Heritage\(^5\) to oversee cultural production, broadcasting, and the CRTC, part of a mandate to ensure “a strong sense of Canadian identity and heritage based on the fundamental characteristics of Canada — bilingualism and multiculturalism — and our diverse cultures and heritage” (Canada, Prime Minister’s Office, 1993). It was Industry Canada, with a mission “to foster a growing competitive, knowledge-based Canadian economy”, that would take charge of telecommunication policy and infrastructure issues (Canada, Industry Canada, 1996). Put side-by-side, the two ministries’ mandates split media convergence into “hard” economic issues (telecommunications) and “soft” cultural issues (broadcasting). Contrast between the impassioned debate provoked by passage of a 1991 Broadcasting Act and the muted discussion over Telecommunications Act legislation in 1993 — the latter dominated more by “expert” testimony and professionalized lobby groups than by nationalist outbursts or heated news coverage — foreshadowed this division.\(^6\)

Calls for information highway policy had been issued as early as the 1970s, and a government ministry created with the potential of implementing it. Yet, as we have seen, the Canadian information society policy framework languished through decades of organizational difficulties, ministerial skirmishes, and low political priority, and was initiated only with the help of an external kick-start. This delay substituted a haphazard policy environment mired in bureaucratic politics for an integrated framework. Movement on the information highway project was the result of neither engineering innovation nor of consumer demand, but of market pressures that had been translated into a US policy initiative. Canadian information highway policy in the 1990s would be propelled less by public servants and committee recommendations than by trade agreements and boardroom decisions — not a policy reaction to technical innovation, but a transformation in how technology is organized politically.\(^7\)

Dispersal of the DoC, then, meant more than the separation of policy-making for content and carriage in the moment of their convergence. It also meant the incorporation of communication policy into other sectors, and begged the question of how a coherent approach to communication policy might be developed. Transformed from a specific ministerial responsibility to a category of state responsibilities to be distributed among political agents, the information society project was being dispersed across the field of governance.

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\(^5\) It has been suggested that the new culture ministry, designated under Canada’s Progressive Conservative government, was inspired by the United Kingdom’s Department of National Heritage designated under Margaret Thatcher’s Conservatives. Notably, however, the Liberal administration which replaced the Progressive Conservative government made no significant change to this reorganisation (see Saul, 1993).

\(^6\) On the Telecommunications Act, see Rideout (1997); on the Broadcasting Act, see Raboy (1995a,b).

\(^7\) The role of political processes in shaping technology through its design, deployment, and uses have been explored through a variety of theoretical stances and empirical studies. See, *inter alia*, Winner (1977).
2.2. New agencies

In April 1994, Industry Canada proposed a discussion paper which attempted to reconcile the external and domestic inputs driving Canadian communication policy. The discussion paper followed on the heels of a newly elected Liberal administration’s January throne speech announcing its commitment to an “information highway”, one week after a similar announcement by US vice-president Al Gore in Los Angeles. Ironically titled The Canadian Information Highway: Building Canada’s Information and Communications Infrastructure, the discussion paper in fact opened by surveying foreign trends (US, European Union, and Japan) before discussing the “implications for Canada”, preferring to look past Canadian political and technological experiences to see media convergence as a largely imported phenomenon (Canada, Industry Canada, 1994).

At the same time, however, this initial government paper attempted to transpose the global information society project onto the traditions and custom of Canadian communication policy. The paper laid out three main objectives to guide future policy directives: creation of jobs through innovation and investment, reinforcement of Canadian sovereignty and cultural identity, and universal access at reasonable cost. Alongside the job creation objective, the goal of reinforcing sovereignty and identity came directly out of Canada’s broadcast policy framework, while the universal access goal had always functioned as the public interest component of Canadian telecommunication policy. If anything, the objectives guiding Canadian communication policy were directed toward developing a unified policy model, signalling the convergence of conventional broadcast and telecommunication frameworks — even as their governing institutions had been distanced.\(^8\)

Against the post-DoC institutional dispersal of communication policy, the discussion paper brought its central goals together. This contradiction would raise a set of policy dilemmas and, at times, redundancies. An Information Highway Advisory Council (IHAC), responsible to the Minister of Industry, was formed to prepare a series of reports and recommendations. As an advisory body, IHAC was charged with mapping an information highway policy framework. Meanwhile the CRTC, the regulatory body responsible to the Minister of Canadian Heritage, was directed to hold public hearings on developing a convergence framework to integrate broadcasting and telecommunications. Significantly, response to the latter would be impressive, recalling that beyond the broadcast and telecommunication models of access, an even more fundamental model for access in Canadian communication policy history is that of access to the policy-making process itself.\(^9\)

Two arm’s-length bodies specifically charged with information highway policy architecture now co-existed. They differed not only in roles and responsibilities, but also in their stance on public access. While both organizations would file their reports in 1995, only the CRTC had held an

\(^8\) Public interest is traditionally a highly polysemic notion that stakeholders have often redefined to suit their needs. In Canada, the public interest directive has traditionally revolved around conceptions of media access. The broadcast model in communication policy emphasizes access to consumption of available product, while the telecommunication model focuses on access to capacity to produce or transmit information. On broadcast and telecom models for media access, see Raboy (1995c). On meanings of “public interest” in communication policy, see Melody (1989).

\(^9\) Canada, Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), 1995. Over 1000 written submissions were forwarded, and seventy-eight oral presentations were made at the March 1995 hearings. See also Raboy (1995c).
extensive public hearing process. IHAC had reserved itself to the input of its 29 commissioners and of privately commissioned studies: indeed, only through concerted effort and informal lobbying were external viewpoints communicated directly to IHAC.\(^10\)

Paradoxically, then, a regulatory body had held more extensive consultations than had the advisory body created for this purpose. This erosion of public consultation’s traditional importance in Canada was not incidental to institutional restructuring.\(^11\) Replacement of public hearings with “expert” advice in an advisory council responsible to the Minister of Industry was hardly compensated for by a CRTC hearings process which demanded a high level of specialized knowledge and time commitment were one to participate at all.\(^12\) Yet the large number of submissions and testimony which were nonetheless forthcoming bear witness to public appreciation of the process’s significance.

In this first phase, Canadian political institutions reacted to cast the foundation for a new brand of communication policy-making whose watchwords were information highway and convergence. In 1995 and 1996, this process would move beyond a domestic focus, not simply through a shift toward international fora, but also by an ever more slippery relationship between policy-making at national and global levels\(^13\) — collapsing whatever distinctions still existed between the two.


3.1. **Brussels G-7 and domestic policy**

The political repositioning of 1993–1994 was not about the transition to an information society so much as it represented the transition of an information society, writ transnationally. It is at the 1995 G-7 meeting in Brussels that older narrations of Canada-as-information-society flowed into the new tale of a global village, publicly consecrating the process’s second phase. As a key conjuncture in assembling a networked globe — at least, its current incarnation — Al Gore’s Global Information Infrastructure proposal to the Brussels summit (see G-7, 1995) is properly understood, not as the mythologized origin for a new era of transnational information brokerage, but as a formal interface between public debate and the policy calculus, although its importance as a component of that calculus remains unclear. See Raboy (1995c).

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\(^10\) Informal ad hoc feedback mechanisms alowed snippets of the public debate generated by the policy process to be filtered directly to Council members, even in the case of comment by organized groups such as the Public Information Highway Advisory Council (P-IHAC) (McDowell & Buchwald, 1997).

\(^11\) The Canadian tradition of communication policy-making integrates public hearings which precede important changes in policy or orientation. Public consultation’s mandate is, in this sense, to act as formal interface between public debate and the policy calculus, although its importance as a component of that calculus remains unclear. See Raboy (1995c).

\(^12\) One intervenor provides a personal account of this process in Hirsh.

\(^13\) By global policy-making, we refer to formulation at supranational level of policies which may then be implemented nationally; Wolfgang Reinicke calls this the “pooling and collective operationalization of internal sovereignty” in his *Global Public Policy: Governing Without Government*? Global policy-making is a subset of global governance which, as Susan Strange has pointed out, extends beyond the “cooperation and standardisation of practice between the governments of territorial states” to include the growing influence of non-state actors, from corporations to criminal organizations to non-profit groups (Strange, 1996).
but as nodal point in a longer process, already ensconced in the international policy coordination
rallied around converting digitized information into a new source of wealth.

Brussels was a point where the governance of markets and technologies intersected. The two do
not behave similarly, but their similarity is that both are artifacts which stick together when models
of governance are operationalized: interoperable networks and interoperable policy environments
are part of the same process.\footnote{In distinguishing between the state and a larger process of government, Miller and Rose (1995, p. 18) stress that “[i]n arguing against a “state centred” conception of political power, we do not mean to suggest that government does not produce centres. But centres of government are multiple: it is not a question of the power of the centralised state, but of how, in relation to what mentalities and devices, by means of what intrigues, alliances and flows — is this locale or that able to act as a centre.” The model for state action elaborated in Brussels was part of the blueprint for this larger process of governance that exceeds the state, but in which the state plays a key role.}

At the Brussels meeting, a model of the state’s role in this model of governance began to be
hammered out, to be coordinated across national boundaries.\footnote{A theme paper prepared for a global communication/trade policy conference held two years later indicates the Brussels meeting’s import: “Market opening is central to the rapid growth in the use of new services and of the take-up of innovative technologies, in accordance with the eight core principles agreed at the G7 Brussels conference in February 1995…. These Principles have become guiding principles for the leading nations in their national strategies and action programmes.” (European Commission, High Level Expert Group, 1997.)} Industry participation confirmed the
status of corporate policy as a realm of “public” policy; the state was called on to take the role of
“facilitator”; public interest representation took the guise of consumer representatives. As blueprint
for a multilateral communication policy framework, this model anticipates both greasing the wheels
of existing economic activity through fast-flowing data (“friction-free capitalism”), and making data
itself the object of exchange, promoting it from the role of accessory to other groups of transaction.

Certain inherent barriers to this model exist, of course: data and information’s permeability to
price valuation is made difficult in that their value is both contextual and resistant to quantifica-
tion, nor can the consequences of information exchange be easily confined to the boundaries of the
transaction itself (Babe, 1995). Widespread speculation on the compatibility of Internet-based
companies with stock markets and traditional profit measurements may be related to this tendency
toward volatility: but the similarity of an information transaction infrastructure to the “free flow”
which has, for more than seventy years, been a traditional US policy objective is striking (Holli-
field & Samarajiva, 1994). Frustrated time and again in trying to make free-flow the de facto
international communication policy through multilateral fora, the emerging global infrastructure was
instead part of a trajectory which saw US free flow rhetoric slide from political arguments (as
democratic necessity) to economic arguments (as commercially indispensable) — a trajectory
already familiar to the Canadian signatories of the 1988 Canada-US Free Trade Agreement.

A “new” version of the information society had been laid out, to be taken home and put into
place by national policy-makers. The Canadian state would do so according to a three-step
process: CRTC convergence hearings, a report from IHAC, and the government’s response.

3.2. Three steps

Based on the CRTC’s 1994 hearings on media convergence, a 1995 report (CRTC, 1995) outlined
a convergence framework which was characterized by two elements: the move to platform
reconvergence, and a national champions strategy backing concentration in order to foster homegrown corporations capable of competing globally. Platform reconvergence\textsuperscript{16}, premised upon a single communications environment composed of several technologies, marked an important shift. From its widespread diffusion in the 1960s and 1970s until 1995, the previous regime had designated cable as the regulator’s chosen instrument: coaxial cable in the ground had both provided sufficient bandwidth and — physically easy to trace — yielded unproblematically to regulation. Now the entire technological environment would be designated as “chosen instrument”. The national champions strategy, meanwhile, may be understood as separating out social from economic calculuses — confounding several public hearings intervenors concerned with opinion pluralism amidst the acquisitions characteristic of industry’s desire to retain control across its chain of value, but welcomed by others as a bold “deregulatory” gesture.\textsuperscript{17}

Criticism of the CRTC’s convergence framework has typically addressed its platform reconvergence and national champions strategies. The framework was more complex than allowed by either its creditors or detractors, however, for example in declaring it “critical that we not ignore the economic limitations of our market, nor lose sight of what we have achieved, by embracing ill-defined promises of unlimited choice that often reflect more dogma than substance, more universal theory than Canadian reality” (CRTC, 1996). Market reliance was declared insufficient for information infrastructures to meet social objectives, even as the CRTC called upon the market to lead information highway development and obliterated previous prohibitions of vertical integration of content and carriage: like the Canadian representation at Brussels\textsuperscript{18}, the CRTC report was carefully contradictory, evoking a history of Canadian approaches to communication policy, but realigning them with the state governance model spelled out in Brussels, producing what McDowell and Buchwald (1997) call “neo-liberal” policy prescriptions. Information society policy design would be administered as an integrative process, not so much a break as a gradual intermingling whose product would be specific to Canadian governance, yet imprinted inside the larger space of new global media governance.

After the CRTC report, IHAC’s September 1995 “final report” was the second step of the three-pronged reaction, and demonstrated a less ambiguous market stance by calling for competing to act as the information highway’s driving force: “success will be determined by the marketplace, not by the government” (IHAC, 1995). This model became the focus of criticism on the part of a range of public interest groups, who charged that social evaluation had been excised from the policy calculus, pointing to the report’s predilection for positioning citizens as “customers” which

\textsuperscript{16} Critiquing widespread use of the term “convergence” to describe contemporary shifts in how communications technologies are regulated and designed (Babe, 1990; and Winseck, 1997) demonstrate the contingent nature of the political and industrial manoeuvres which led to the initial splitting of broadcasting from telecommunications models.

\textsuperscript{17} One FCC official went as far as to say that Canada had leapt ahead of the USA in this area (see Raboy, 1996).

\textsuperscript{18} The G-7 nations agreed in Brussels to an eight-point framework which added three principles to the five of the NII, and so equal access, content diversity, and international cooperation were added to Gore’s private investment, competition, flexibility in regulation, open access, and universal service. While Heritage Minister Michel Dupuy added Canada’s voice to the European G-7 members to ensure the inclusion of the three additional principles to the GII’s, Industry Minister John Manley was busy “remind[ing] everone of Canada’s aggressive pro-market stance” (Raboy, 1998).
cast the public interest problematic in market terms. While calls for the information highway to distribute social benefits to citizens had been translated into various IHAC working groups, a singular model for the state’s role vis-à-vis the market underlay the report’s recommendations, suggesting limited autonomy from the constraints of an evitable march of globalization and technology across future time and disaggregated space.

The government’s response to IHAC was the third of the three Canadian policy statements coordinating the rewiring of national communication policy into a global information society, and marked a terminological shift from “information highway” to an “information society” vocabulary (Canada, Industry Canada, 1996). Building the Information Society, signed by Industry Canada, emphasised the information sector’s incursion into all areas of the economy and of society, as though to remind readers that the transformation of Canadian communication and information policy was also its dispersal— no policy area imperable to the information society. Like its IHAC counterpart, the response welded social issues (here, universal access to technology and citizen consultation to work out benefit distribution) to technoeconomic teleologies: “If we fall behind our major trading partners in building our Information Highway, its worldwide counterpart will come to Canada — later — and not the way Canadians want it,” it warns, alerting citizens to the social costs, job losses, and reduced competitiveness posed by future failure to keep up with competitors. Yet surely this outcome is itself dependent on policy strategies, insofar as policy’s role is to hold markets accountable to the obligations which enforce citizen entitlements. Acknowledging private enterprise’s formidable role in driving information infrastructure development, whether those information highways are inevitable and, if so, what form they will take is tied to the state’s role in these challenges. To the extent that national communication policy is a segment of the international policy coordination that takes place through informal meetings and formal agreements aimed at fostering a networked environment that is “open for business,” predictions of the information highway’s inevitability are more properly understood as self-fulfilling prophecy.

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19 Public interest groups were formed around IHAC’s continuing activities, cobbling together coalitions of library and teacher associations, consumer groups, communication workers unions, and a range of others. See McDowell and Buchwald (1997) for an overview of this process.

20 IHAC Working Groups were convened on access and social impacts, on Canadian content and culture, on competitiveness and job creation, on learning and training, and on research and development/applications and market development.

21 It is important to note divergent recommendations within IHAC itself, including the dissenting report of labour representative and IHAC commissioner Jean-Claude Parrot, as well as the IHAC subcommittee on Canadian content and culture’s pro-interventionist stance which positioned information infrastructures as natural extensions of the broadcast and telecommunications environments. While dissenters disagreed on the communications model IHAC should have adopted — some advocated a broadcast model to ensure that collective cultural obligations be met, where as telecom model advocates were concerned that the broadcasting model would merely entrench existing inequalities — a consensus developed around what was seen as inadequate policy provisions for access in the IHAC report.

22 For commentary on the leaps on logic in such a forecast see Babe, Transformation of Economics, pp. 77–80, on the idea that the “Information Highway” is a singular and exterior force which “will come” to Canada; the determinism which condenses autonomous market, self-propelled technology, and instrumental evolution; the reduction of wired world to the financial calculuses of trading partners.
CRTC, IHAC, Industry Canada: the three responses examined here are the tangible traces of Canadian communication policy’s post-Brussels shift. That shift’s function was to collapse the “information society” into a single policy project, neither domestic nor transnational, but slipping constantly between these. Transforming a history of Canada-as-information-society into a global story called for the reinscription of traditional non-market policy objectives into a new framework that contained, not contradicted, these objectives. The cohabitation of no-market objectives with market prescriptions for obtaining them works to smooth over the transition to a new mode of information society governance that places information’s commodification at the centre of economy and society. But it also attests to an open fissure in a policy process attempting to mediate between the “public interest” objectives which constitute its history and can be heard in public intervention, and the evolving role of a globalized “promotional state” model in the context of commerce’s ongoing conversion to the digital faith.

Bubbling beneath this fissure is a reconfiguration of how the state organizes its relations with its territory and its citizenry. That Canadian communication policy is increasingly formulated in multilateral international fora means the reconfiguration of Canadian communication policy’s central narrative, which is about producing nationhood by binding space. The imbuing of territory with national culture must always be mediated institutionally; Canada’s particularly technological twist has set up Canadian nationhood as the object of government policies which mobilize technologies of communication. Communication policy’s nationalist thrust was the narrative that sometimes legitimated, sometimes endangered public interest objectives. The process discussed here, aimed at accommodating the Brussels GII model, may be called the globalization of Canadian communication policy in the sense that it represents a specific configuration of the global seen as precursor to a brand of social prosperity that is measurable in economic terms. Indeed, perhaps the most pervasive artefact of information society governance’s globalization is governance itself, that is, the Brussels-catalysed territorializing of a “promotional state” model wherein — to take a page from IHAC’s report — as facilitator for capital, the government takes on the role of defining the rules governing information exchange, acts as model user of information technologies, and encourages others to use them (see also Vedel, 1996).

It is common to analyse the adoption of this model as evidence for the weakening of the state and concomitant strengthening of corporations, for the increasing ungovernability of transnational industry, and for the privatization of public policy. The danger of such analyses, however, is when it gives the impression that states and corporations are vying for power in a game in which the corporate sector currently has the upper hand. That misses the point of public policy’s transition in the post-Brussels “promotional state” model. The promotional state’s role is the very opposite of weak underling: the struggle is between governments and corporations, but inside the state and over the state’s role — that is, the question of who orients government policy and to what ends. Here, the state finds itself playing a highly prized role as facilitator, promoter, and partner to industry.

23 Theoretical frameworks for this relationship between the economic and social places have been proposed, among others, through neo-regulationist and post-Fordist models (Mosco, 1996; Babe, 1994; Aksoy & Robbins, 1992).
Calls for an economy fuelled by the information commodity translates into communication policy’s dispersal, lending a new face to communication and information governance. Political power continues to be organized geographically, but the fragmented territories of global markets clamber across these jurisdictions, and it becomes impossible to analyse communication policy as a singularly domestic or international phenomenon because it is always slipping between these, its networks of power snaking across governments, international agreements, transnational business. After the merging of national and global policy in 1995–1996, the subsequent and final moment of the policy process tracked in this paper would attempt to extent this footlooseness to sectors of activity — both scattering communication policy into several areas, and sliding its port of entry to the realm of trade policy.

4. Sectoral jurisdictions, 1997

4.1. Information and trade policy

Communication and trade policy intersect in the policy programme seeking to position information as a key commodity in international commercial trade. That policy programme would formally align the two sectors in 1997. A series of political moves were already in play to set the groundwork, however. The 1988 Canada–US Free Trade Agreement (CUSFTA) was a catalyst for Canada’s role in this programme. Public debate on the CUSFTA had been framed by a cultural nationalism, to two significant effects: opposition to CUSFTA was articulated as a bilateral struggle over American cultural domination, and trade in cultural industries was designated as the cultural sector’s central object of debate. Both of these positions had significant weaknesses, however: the CUSFTA (and its 1992 successor, the North American Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA) cannot be understood except as a portion of larger systems of trade flows, and the cultural industries were but part of the cultural enjeux of free trade.24

One of CUSFTA/NAFTA’s central components was the inclusion of trade in services in its framework — a first in modern international trade agreements.25 This element of CUSFTA/NAFTA26 came in the form of an annex on telecommunications and computer services, and was entirely consistent with US policy’s shift of its free-flow programme from communication to trade policy, that is, trade in services as economic imperative, not free flow of information as political necessity. While public attention remained fixed on traditional questions of cultural content, therefore, CUSFTA negotiators were quietly establishing congruency between “culture” and

24 Our interpretation is influenced by the work of Graham Carr, who has pointed out that “FTA is merely one agreement in a series of bilateral and multilateral American initiatives which aim to redefine culture as an object of trade by linking it to the concept of information and the doctrines of technology transfer and free flows” (Carr, 1991).
25 The US-Canada and U.S.-Israel free trade agreements were “test cases” which, according to a U.S. official cited in Samarajiva’s useful study, emerged from “a desire to create useful precedents for future multilateral negotiations. In both cases, the negotiations provided… useful experience in negotiating trade agreements in services” (Samarajiva, 1993).
26 The CUSFTA annex in question did not undergo significant change in the renegotiation of the agreement under NAFTA.
“information”, laying the groundwork for better compatibility between cultural production and international commodity exchange. This important round of communication policy-making had occurred with no hint of the traditional public consultation process, suggesting future unorthodoxy in Canadian communication policy. Subsequent to NAFTA the inclusion of an extremely similar clause in the telecommunication annex to the General Agreement on Trade in Services, itself part of the 1994 GATT Uruguay round, constituted the first international agreement on services, and underscored the test-case role of the CUSFTA. Both NAFTA and GATS prohibited the regulation of “enhanced” telecommunication services, but both included exceptions for cultural industries — opening the door to what Winseck has termed an “arcane politics of line-drawing” in order to determine which services qualify as cultural broadcasting (may be regulated) and which as telecommunications (may not) (Winseck, 1997).

The wanderings of a single policy text on trade in services, from CUSFTA/NAFTA into GATS, illustrates an increased slipperiness in territorial jurisdictions, hopping from US foreign policy to bilateral to international policy agreements. The same slipperiness was now setting in among sectoral jurisdictions: the increased commodification of information in the sphere of communication policy is the same thing as the convergence of communication policy and trade policy.

4.2. Policy convergence

Definitive convergence of the two policy areas arrived with the World Trade Organization’s Basic Agreement on Telecommunications. For the US policy apparatus, the historic deal meant the culmination of years of intervention and the definitive displacement of communication policy within sectoral jurisdictions, commuting issues of communication and culture to the utilitarian realm of the information commodity. Where the GATS Telecommunications Annex had been centred on technology’s ability to grease the wheels of already existing commercial sectors, the new accord focused on telecommunication as the locus of trade in and of itself (Melody, 1997). Information in commodity trading had made way for trading of the information commodity, pointing to the weight according the digital environment by market handlers.

Seeking to place national flesh on the new transnational infrastructure, a senior Industry Canada policy-maker published an evaluation of the telecoms accord which argued that “Canada’s package is one of the best (for Canada too)”. It is telling, however, that this “verdict” is based on “Canadian companies hav[ing] gained a commitment for access to major markets on a multilateral basis, with clear rules in a sector where none existed before” (Tiger, 1997). What of Canadian people? The verdict in question, that is, avoids the more complex evaluation made necessary by

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27 Other texts being written during the same period would join in, including World Intellectual Property Organization treaties in December 1996, and an Information Technology Agreement signed in Singapore during the same month which opened national markets to free trade in computer and information hardware.

28 The WTO telecoms agreement was signed on 15 February 1997, and became effective as of 4 February 1998. Hammered out through three years of negotiation — that is, since the Uruguay round GATS had failed to fully meet US policy objectives — the WTO accord required its signatories to liberalize their telecommunication markets and to allow providers from other economies to offer services on an equal footing with nationals, including the building of infrastructure.
a policy trajectory in which increased government activism on the international stage — in gaining access for national industry to global markets — replaces domestic policy-making capacity, a sector more traditionally aligned with social and cultural objectives. The verdict’s error is in taking international competition as a policy goal, rather than as policy tool to facilitate the attainment of goals. The two are not synonymous.

Yet it is neither surprising nor erroneous for a senior policy-maker at Industry Canada to use industrial criteria to evaluate policy performance. Rather, the problem lies at another level — taking us full circle to the institutional restructuring which split, rather than integrated, the then-Department of Communication. The system put into place as institutional seat of the new Canadian information society dispersed communication policy-making among different ministries and departments, but also concentrated the lead decision-making power in market-oriented units such that further-reaching evaluation of social impact is always someone else’s responsibility.

Communication policy’s new seat at the World Trade Organization table is the same phenomenon on a larger scale, packing a sociocultural issue into a more limited market calculus. The confluence of communication policy with trade policy conjures forth an alternate history of communication policy which can exist only in the future anterior, that is, as the history of trade-policy-as-future-communication-policy. The assembly of a global information society through the international trade stream, criss-crossed but certainly not captured by the initiatives of international communication fora — UNESCO, ITU, INTELSAT — reaches back for another past.29 As the initial international trade agreements to deal with trade in services and communications, NAFTA and GATT thus take on a renewed importance in the rearview mirror. CUSFTA/NAFTA is “discovered” as a key document in Canadian communication policy’s altered timeline, having ushered in the contours of the new information society and radically shifted the intent and process of communication governance. The information society now positioned inside a history of trade policy and free-flowing data, both territorial and sectoral jurisdictions in flux, it remained only to work out a framework for commodity exchange. In July 1997, the US government announced — in tandem with approval from a concurrent European Ministers conference in Bonn (European Union, 1997) — its Framework for Global Electronic Commerce, aimed at ensuring that tariffs not be applied to the information commodity.30 Implications for Canadian and other domestic policy frameworks included the Framework’s railing against cultural exemptionalism, naming “areas of concern” such as content regulation and foreign content quotas as disguised trade barriers.

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29 Braman traces this alternate history of communication policy to the 1974 U.S. Trade Act, which was the beginning of the United States effort to develop trade rules to govern services, and through the U.S.’s 1982 placement of trade in services on the GATT Agenda, to the 1988 Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act which enacted a major overhaul of trade law (Braman, 1990). The intersection of this historical retrospective with the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) and UNESCO should be recalled, for example, through the tension brought to the process by a US policy stance that avoids participating in non-free-flow fora. As Winseck and Cuthbert (1997) point out, “NAFTA and GATT resolve these tensions by shifting international communication policy out of the ITU and UNESCO and into new arenas without any regulatory tradition in international communication. In effect, NAFTA and GATT are the tabula rasa upon which the future of international communications policy is being written free of the meddlesome history of pragmatic democracy and universal multilateralism that prevailed in UNESCO and the ITU.”

30 Under this proposal, material goods ordered electronically would continue to be taxed.
4.3. Transitional ambiguity

The transitional policy apparatus put into place for the Canadian information society between 1993 and 1997 was marked by ambiguity. A governmental directive was issued to IHAC to prepare a second final report through a one-year extension; the report would constitute a coda to the process, underlining rather than resolving its ambiguity. The IHAC’s terms of reference now specifically included the Internet — this had not previously been the case — and were designed to facilitate the clearing out of any unfinished business from IHAC’s original round.

The report, however, opts for sweeping tones, framed by discussion of three major societal changes (IHAC, 1997). Distance will no longer pose an obstacle, we learn; knowledge will apparently “become increasingly available to everyone, allowing us all to make wiser decisions in all aspects of our lives”; and the vague promise of a utopian future where everyone is a producer as well as consumer of online knowledge is reiterated. Preparing Canada for a Digital World is the same old story, in other words: hopeful, even inspirational rhetoric encased in competition-driven market imperatives which shut down any margin of manoeuver policy-makers might have felt they had. It is therefore unsurprising that the IHAC II final report was not the focus of any significant amount of public debate — especially given the absence of public consultation in the council’s procedures.

Yet the context of reduced friction and increased mobility between territorial and sectoral jurisdictions ensured that statements like the IHAC II report were already being taken up in a different policy frame than those released two years or even one year earlier. In a strongly-worded newspaper piece published within the same period, for example, Noam responded to cyberlibertarians who saw the Internet as a lawless frontier by arguing that “[s]ince the Internet has moved from a techie preserve to office park, shopping mall and entertainment arcade, it is sheer fantasy to expect that it will be left a libertarian island in a world full of jealous competitors and conflicting public objectives” (Noam, 1997). What is worth retaining, we would argue, is not simply whether regulation will bump out libertarianism, but why: to act as financial regulator. Communication policy has certainly not been absorbed wholesale by trade policy and, indeed, at the international level it is instructive to witness the redeployment of a number of older

31 Invited to address the Bonn meeting of European ministers referred to above, for example, Industry Canada minister John Manley advanced cautiously that “Canada is a strong believer in the ability of the private sector to regulate the information highway and its contents.... And while our private sector Information Highway Advisory Council recommended no hasty regulation of the Internet, we are prepared to intervene, selectively, in the marketplace to ensure that the private sector has the right set of signals.” Canada/Industry Canada, Minister of Industry speaking notes. Statement delivered to the Ministerial Conference on Global Information Networks, Bonn, 1997.

32 A more helpful discussion of the uses of knowledge appears in the final report of the European High Level Group of Experts, which suggests that “it is essential to make a clear distinction between “data” and “information” and “knowledge”. From our perspective, the generation of unstructured data does not automatically lead to the creation of information, nor can all information be equated with knowledge. All information can be classified, analyzed, and reflected upon and otherwise processed to generate knowledge. Both data and information, in this sense, are comparable to the raw materials processed by industry to make useful products” (European Commission, High Level Expert Group, 1997).
communication policy initiatives. But in its altered form, the information society traced out through communication policy is something very different than that with which Canada started.

5. Conclusion

The process described here represents the retooling of Canada’s communication policy framework between 1993 and 1997. That process represented a series of convergences encapsulated by increased fluidity between territorial as well as sectoral jurisdictions. What does this fluidity mean for understanding communication policy frameworks?

Ironically, the Canadian process yielded a framework which was no more apt to deal with media convergence, and may indeed have been less so. But the question here is not one of ranking frameworks, nor have we attempted to do so: rather, we feel, the useful lesson is how an unfolding regime for information society governance interfaces — or does not — with already existing policy tools. Indeed, the literature on globalization indicates that, rather than the simple model of a culturally homogenizing steamroller, globalization is taking place in a more complex manner, working through and restructuring the cultures it encounters through a series of negotiations (see, inter alia, Appadurai, 1996; Castells, 1997; Morley & Robins, 1995). Our study of the Canadian process demonstrates that the interoperable networks which underpin globalization are being accompanied by interoperable policy frameworks which, similarly, are not replacing domestic political traditions, but rather, learning to accommodate and absorb them.

For those who deal with communication policy at a national level, it is no longer possible to conduct coherent research or make sensible intervention without integrating this global process into the core of one’s agenda. Indeed, cross-national comparisons take on a basic importance in this context: whereas comparative work once involved holding up spatially discontinuous events or characteristics to a common measuring stick, it now involves intersection and commonality, tracing multiple repercussions to single events. Perhaps that is the next step: to what extent can the evolution of one framework help understand those evolving elsewhere? Can the legitimating narratives of yesterday’s Canadian information society — the thrust of national identity and the parry of public interest — be said to be facing serious competition from a very different triangulation of state, territory, and citizenry which composites a set of ideas about governance and technology into its watchword, “globalization”? And, if so, have the high speeds and low latency of Internet time toppled Canada from the role that McLuhan famously assigned it as, for the world’s information societies, a “distant early warning”? (McLuhan & Powers, 1989).

33 The NWICO movement, for example, appears to have found some new life — although less vigour — in the form of fora such as UNESCO’s World Commission on Culture and Development (see United Nations/UNESCO, 1995). This report was the object of an Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development in Stockholm, 31 March to 2 April 1998.

34 “If geopolitics once required Roman roads or terrestrial motorways, the metropolitics that is taking shape will essentially require electronic information highways and satellite networks capable of achieving unity of time for a telecommunications system that is now universal” (Virilio, 1997).
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