

## Depoliticizing Current Affairs Television: The Nightly Project of

# The Journal

By Ian Taylor



In the third issue of *borderlines*, Marc Raboy offered a powerful analysis of the ideological context and likely recommendations of the Conservative Government's Taskforce on Communications Policy.<sup>1</sup> One of these recommendations is likely to be some form of "privatisation of the CBC. Readers of this magazine are likely in the not too distant future to be bombarded by CBC journalists and other defenders of the Corporation with urgent, not to say desperate, pleas for the defense of public broadcasting -- along the lines, perhaps, of the piece Mark Starowicz, the producer of *The Journal*, published in a recent issue of *This Magazine*.<sup>2</sup> No doubt we will all feel we should rush to the defence of public broadcasting, but it may be that our commitment will be halting and rather begrudging. We may no longer recognize the CBC as a strong, serious and visible source of public political, cultural or economic debate in this country. Certainly CBC television is no longer involved in the representation, and therefore reproduction, of such political debate.

My concern here is to offer a close, critical analysis of the CBC's most recent, and most highly publicised innovation: the nightly current affairs programme, *The Journal*. I am interested in seeing this new programme (in what may seem a contradictory light) as an essentially *non-political form of current affairs television*; I am interested in the role of *The Journal* as a vehicle in a larger de-politicisation of the public sphere in Canada.



### The Journal as a Managerial Initiative

*The Journal*, launched in January 1982 after three years of in-house struggle and planning, was by all accounts a product of two connected concerns within the CBC. There was, in the first place, a deep anxiety over the continuing extension of American programming into all Canadian television networks. Mark Knelman observes:

"...the CBC was spending vast sums to produce Canadian entertainment that -- with rare exceptions such as *King of Kensington* - Canadians didn't want to watch. The drama department went from bad to worse and the variety department was too pathetic even to be worth attacking."<sup>3</sup>

The decision to run a current affairs programme five nights a week, subsequent to a news broadcast brought forward one hour from 11 pm, was an attempt by CBC journalists to win a Canadian audience in prime-time. It was also an attempt (the second concern of CBC managers in 1979-82) to have Canadian politicians take the CBC more seriously, by winning a larger audience share but also by devoting more time to these politicians' pressing concerns, and thereby, perhaps, to influence, for the better, the CBC's budgetary appropriations.

Quite unlike the earlier CBC current affairs programme -- *This Hour Has Seven Days*<sup>4</sup> -- whose public resonance and significance the CBC would allegedly like to reproduce, *The Journal* is therefore a *managerial* (rather than essentially journalistic) initiative. As such, as journalists working elsewhere within the CBC complainingly reveal, *The Journal* from the days of the final CBC decision to proceed (in March 1981), has been extraordinarily well-financed, and, in particular, positively inundated with the very latest and most expensive items of modern technology. The costs to other CBC programmes and departments of the management's overwhelming moral and financial support for *The Journal* have been considerable.



Photos: Geoff Miles

As a product of managerial initiative, it is perhaps also not surprising that *The Journal* has had a distinctively and consistently consensual political character to it. As early as December 1982, George Bain was commenting acerbically on "*The Journal*'s seemingly chronic head-down incuriosity about anything below the level of what the government says."<sup>5</sup> We shall say more later ourselves on *The Journal*'s particular relationship (of cynicism and subservience) to authority.

### The Journal as a Technological Form

One of the earliest decisions taken before the launch of *The Journal* was that the programme would be given the resources to purchase electronic news-gathering (ENG) equipment rather than having to rely on film: ENG equipment is much more mobile than film cameras and cuts out the need for film processing completely. The end product also gives the impression of being live and eliminates the "datedness" that some film images imply. The programme would routinely revolve around interviews conducted by the hosts (in the first year, primarily Barbara Frum and Mary Lou Finlay) with guests located in different parts of the world. These "double-ender" interviews would be observed by the audience from a position behind the host who, in the foreground, would appear to be looking up at an enlarged image of the guest responding to her questions. In fact, these interviews are conducted over an "audio hook-up" with the host being filmed in the studio looking at a blank screen, and the guest being recorded by a video (ENG) crew. The resulting video cassette is then relayed at speed to Toronto, if necessary by satellite, and editors piece together a conversation apparently taking place between two talking heads in two quite separate, sometimes very distant, locations.

The use of these double-enders (already in use on ABC's *Nightline*) was a considerable technological advance for the CBC. So also was the introduction of techniques allowing for the simultaneous interview of guests located in two or three different locations in the world, allowing the manipulation of their images, for example, through cubes spinning around the television picture. A further innovation in *The Journal* has been the use of music -- a particularly staccato, abbreviated, fast music -- to introduce, punctuate and conclude the thirty-eight minutes of programme.<sup>6</sup> These short bursts of music not only lead the viewer into and out of adverts; they also give the programme a sense of speedy up-to-dateness. We sense we are being presented with very *fresh information*, as if we are linked to an international information-processing network.

Even sympathetic commentators have noted that the technology in use by *The Journal* has been an overwhelming determinant of the programme's form and, indeed, its internal discourse:

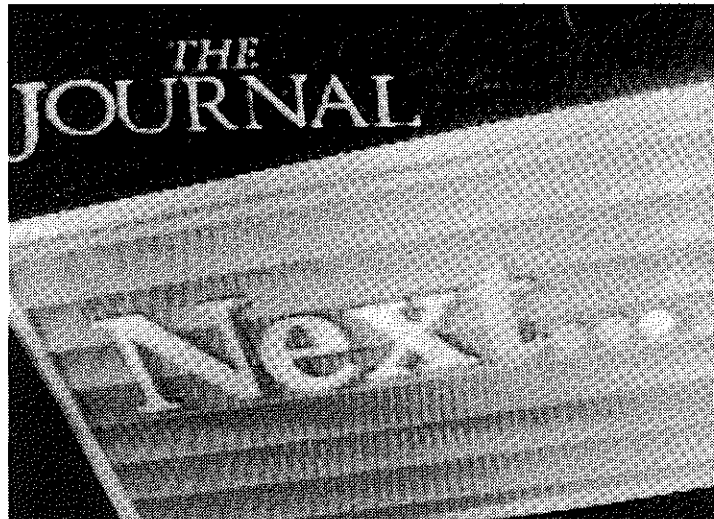
At first, the flashy graphics and music seemed like a substitute for content, and the technology seemed to get in the way; the on-air people sometimes appeared to be talking to each other but rarely talking to the audience. The visuals were rough, fuelling jokes about radio with pictures.<sup>7</sup>

On 20 September 1984, *The Journal* screened a special programme on higher education in which nearly all participants were actually in Toronto, but were filmed in different locations (notably at the University of Toronto, a matter of a half mile from *The Journal*'s own studios). On 8 October 1984, on the occasion of the resignation of Ontario Premier Bill Davis, *The Journal* carried double-ender interviews with guests at its New York, Washington and London desks. It is not immediately obvious that such an expensive and complex set of interviews was justified, when more measured assessments of Mr. Davis' accomplishments were to follow on, in great number, later in the week.

But *The Journal*'s apparent subservience to its own technological capability, which has been made the topic of a more aesthetic or pragmatic critique, is of limited significance for our more political and analytic purposes. There seem to be at least three aspects of *The Journal*'s use of technology that structure the programme in a *routine* and *predictable* way and which thereby contribute to the programme's overall discursive and ideological significance:

### 1. Technology and an Information Culture

I have already spoken of *The Journal*'s use of a speedy style and, in particular, the use of music as a means of conveying the impression of a programme that is faithfully but breathlessly presenting "fast-breaking news". In this respect, *The Journal*, like *As It Happens* is an expression of Mr. Starowicz's declared objective of "building an information culture" in Canada. This "display" of "being-in-touch" is given further emphasis by the zoom shot with which the programme always closes, showing an array of television monitors, as well as by the shot which sometimes appears, of the presenters backed by a further array of clocks showing the time in different major cities of the world. In reality, *The Journal* has no permanent studios or reporters outside of Canada, relying instead on existing thinly-spread staff of the CBC News, on arrangements with American networks and occasionally, on feeds from other other English-speaking television systems (like the BBC) or American networks for routine coverage of world events as they emerge. The only foreign coverage undertaken by *The Journal* itself is when *Journal* reporters like Ann MacMillan are sent overseas on particular assignments (to produce "special reports").



### 2. Technology and the Representation of News-Events

The rationale given within the CBC for the wholesale rejection of film, in favour of ENG equipment, was that film gave an impression of outdated imagery and/or information: the assumed logic of this argument is that dated images or information is unhelpful to, and unwanted by, a television audience. It has, of course, already been argued by critics that television news programmes, in their constant preoccupation with the 24-hour news round and their overwhelming "event-orientation", tend to "inoculate" the presentation of news from *historical* conditions for the creation of newsworthy events. The consequences of this event-orientation are particularly debilitating in respect to foreign news. Gattung and Ruge's classic paper on the coverage of foreign news in American and European newspapers shows how popular knowledge of conditions in particular parts of the world becomes reduced to a stereotyped and superficial knowledge of discrete events that have been the subject of headline treatment in mass circulation newspapers.<sup>8</sup> How many Europeans understood the issue which Québec posed for a federal Canada in the Mid-1970s? How many North Americans understand the sources of the "troubles" in Northern Ireland or the full significance and impact of "Thatcherism" in the United Kingdom?

This process is exacerbated, in the case of *The Journal*, by the ideological priority that is placed on the modernity or up-to-dateness of "the image". The assumption is that the "information-processing" that is required in successful television is the processing only of information about immediately developing events.



### 3. Technology and the Position of the Audience

*The Journal* opens every evening with a shot of what appears, a little ambiguously, to be a keyhole. As the voice-over announces the "headlines" for the programmes in firm tones and with emphasis ("Tonight, on *The Journal*..."), this keyhole enlarges and disappears -- as it were, around and behind the camera, as it zooms forward to reveal, in quick succession, up to three short preview shots of the evening's upcoming stories. Each shot is synchronised with the "headline" uttered by the voice-over.

Most current affairs programmes on television have opening sequences, or "hookers" and "leads" as they are variously called, that have become characteristic and familiar to their audiences. But the choice of such opening sequences is not a matter of mere form or even of otherwise neutral aesthetic significance. Brunsdon and Morley have shown how the opening visual imagery of BBC Television's evening news and discussion programme *Nationwide* (actually a *mandala* -- a magic circle with a set of concentrically-arranged figures with spherical emblems located around a central point), serves to emphasize regional pluralism but within an insistent,

all-encompassing unifying framework (taken by them to signify "the Nation").<sup>9</sup> BBC Television's *World News*, like the competing *News at Ten* of Independent Television News, with the confidence so characteristic of British culture, always opens with a shot of the House of Commons at Westminster (in the case of ITN, accompanied by the chimes of Big Ben).

CBC Television News' opening sequence, with the world represented as a Rubik's Cube turning on an axis, may perhaps be an expression of a less deceitful self-regard on the part of Canadians. Certainly, it evidences a sense that "Canada" is less than central to the key events that are unfolding in the world.

Something of the same message is apparent in the lead into *The Journal*. But the choice of a keyhole as the organising image surely also suggests a particular *Journal* view of its audience. Descriptively and prescriptively, that is, *The Journal* sees itself as working for an audience that is not, and ought not necessarily to be, involved in a personal way with the event the programme portrays. Literally, the suggestion is, of course, of an *audience as voyeur*.

### Political Television and Audience Entertainment

Robert Stam, amongst many others, has pointed to the transformation during the 1970s of television news programming in the United States.<sup>10</sup> Possibly as a reaction to the unremitting evening news reports of disaster and violence during the period of the Vietnam War, American networks have all introduced a very different form of news. Sometimes referred to as "happy news" and nearly always described as "news shows", these programmes have a very personalized and entertaining style of presentation. Interspersed as they are in some instance with commercials within the programme, the programmes are designed to "flow" in order to retain the attention of the "consuming" audience. According to Stam, there is also an observable tendency for these news shows to work on the reduction of the audience's anxiety over the otherwise unsettling news emanating from different parts of the world. In part, Stam believes, this process of reduction of anxiety is achieved via the elevation of certain authoritative male journalists to the role of sooth-sayers, or symbolic fathers, whose relationship to the audience is constantly worked upon to maintain a very personal and reassuring familiarity.

This tradition, initiated in a period of different and more interrogatory news reporting by Walter Cronkite, is now carried on within the happy news format by anchormen like Dan Rather of CBS, Peter Jennings of ABC and others.

News reporting in Canada has undoubtedly been heavily influenced by the new American news formats, especially at the level of evening news reports on local stations (which are marketed almost exclusively around allegedly pleasing personalities of particular programmed "anchors") but also nationally (for example, in the 12:30 lunch time newshows of Global television and CBC's new news magazine, *Midday*). *The Journal* itself, with its official brief as an in-depth current affairs programme ("providing a sober second-look" at the day's events) and with a 38-minute slot to fill, may not appear to be constructed in any simple sense as "happy news".<sup>11</sup> But *The Journal*'s managers, when evaluating the impact of the programme, are interested not in the size of the audience "captured" by an individual programme, but also in the scores achieved on what is called the "Entertainment Index" -- a measure of the extent to which a sampled audience reported it was "entertained" by a programme -- in surveys conducted by the CBC's Audience Research Department. By adopting this measuring (rather than any measure of the audience's understanding of issues or its sense of having been personally involved in particular issues), *The Journal* has clearly chosen to work within the regime of television as pleasure rather than the tradition of television as a subversive, confrontational or interrogatory journalistic medium.

*The Journal* proves to be "entertainment", however, of a very particular kind: my argument is that the entertainment provided consists largely in the pleasure which the modern or even "modernist" bourgeois audience in Canada derives from a feeling of mastery over what it thinks is important information, and the connected pleasure which such an audience derives from feeling that its disconnected prejudices and/or perspectives about the public terrain are legitimized in journalistic representations of "issues" or "events". So the two organising themes of any *Journal* interview, I would argue, are

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(a) the insistence of the interviewer on obtaining "the facts" of "the story" from particular guests or interviewees.<sup>12</sup> The practice appears to be to press interviewees until their individual story is complete for the practical purpose of the audience being able to recount its key features, briefly, at work the following morning. So the touchstone guiding the interviewing journalist is the "knowledge" about events or issues and audience feels it needs to know.

(b) the determination of nearly all *The Journal*'s presenters to ask questions, either in interviews or during special reports, which represent most of the different ideological and/or political positions held within the Canadian population. This is particularly noticeable as an aspect of Ms. Barbara Frum's interviewing practice (giving rise as it nearly always does to a brash but essentially illogical sequence of questions, the subject of many complaints by people who have been interviewed by Ms. Frum).<sup>13</sup> But the concern to represent every conceivable aspect of *consensual* politics in Canada is apparent in most of the presenters working for *The Journal*.

In representing these consensual positions, *The Journal* also, almost by definition, works to reproduce a very specific and narrow definition of politics. Politics is overwhelmingly conceived of as that practice which takes place on a daily basis on Parliament Hill (or by extension, on Capitol Hill, Westminster etc.). It is absolutely not a notion of politics as being of potential interest and direct relevance to large masses of Canadian citizens. It is a conception of politics which therefore routinely represents "talking heads" from the three parliamentary parties in a studio discussion, along with clips from the parliamentary television coverage itself, as the only way of "televising politics". Any alternative vision of politics tends to be pathologized. On 26 September 1984, for example, at the height of the moral panic engendered by the killing of nine police officers in Ontario and Québec, *The Journal* screened a special on "Crime, Deterrence and Vengeance". One of the guests on this programme, Mr. Warren Allmand, erstwhile Solicitor General in one of the Liberal Governments, continually attempted to suggest that the police killings were an expression not of the absence of capital punishment but rather of the poverty of social programmes in place for youth in Canada. In one of her characteristically aggressive interventions, Ms. Frum interrupted Mr. Allmand and demanded to know "short of bringing heaven on earth" what Mr. Allmand thought of *capital punishment*. The ideological effect of this interruption was, of course, to close off the possibility of any discussion that might have challenged the link, essential to bourgeois penology, that is thought to exist between capital punishment and the levels of homicide.

The interruptions made by Ms. Frum during interviews could be the subject of a separate study. One of the main aspects of the interruptions, however, appears to be the establishment of the parameters of the consensual view; the concern is always to identify what "we" should think, do or feel about particular topics. In this particular respect, Ms. Frum and her co-presenters do behave rather like the symbolic fathers of American news programmes; but, of course, the significant difference is that the programme has been introduced, continually for the first six months and frequently since, by two women.

The original choice of two women co-presenters for *The Journal* is thought by other commentators to have had no particular significance. According to Mark Knelman:

"Starowicz was committed to the idea of two hosts and, though there were several men on the short list, he didn't shy away from putting two women together."<sup>14</sup>

The elevation of Ms. Frum and Ms. Finlay to the position of co-presenters of *The Journal*, therefore, was no more a reflection of their gender than was Mrs. Margaret Thatcher's election to the leadership of the British Conservative Party in 1974; their promotions depended on their competence as defined within a profession/party already heavily dominated by men. Frum, Finlay and Thatcher are decidedly not in their present positions because they represent a particular (namely, women's) interest; they are there because they represent a professionalism as otherwise defined and because they do *not* try to speak for an interest.<sup>15</sup> Barbara Frum and Mary Lou Finlay never interview their guests from a women's perspective—even, let it be said, during the election specials of September 1984 on the three parties' policies for women. They are, therefore, not to be spoken of as "token women" because they do not raise a feminist interest as a perspective on "the news" even in the most tentative or apologetic of manners. They are there as professional arbiters of consensus between political positions defined overwhelmingly in parliamentary terms.

To see this is also to see that *The Journal* is more or less routinely engaged in a "fudge": it constantly and predictably avoids any informative interrogation of ideologies that compete with the existing parliamentary consensus, and it constantly takes differences which people who are involved in conventional forms of politics may believe to exist and elides them into a consensual form. One can only assume that there is a particular, largely middle class audience in Canada, in the troubled circumstances of economic recession and Cold War politics in the mid-1980s, for whom such consensual "closures" constitute a form of reassurance and even of pleasure.

### The Journal, its "Guests" and Authority

In a recently published reflection on the "slow dissolve" of public broadcasting in Canada, the executive producer of *The Journal*, Mark Starowicz, bemoans the fact that

"The Canadian broadcast spectrum has become a competition among importers of foreign products -- Honda dealers competing with Toyota dealers. The major producer -- the only major car factory -- has been the victim. The Canadian broadcasting system, through importation and privatization, has been Americanized. That privatization has been administered at an almost promiscuous pace by the CRTC, which failed to maintain a balance between importation and domestic production."<sup>16</sup>

Anyone who has watched *The Journal* with any regularity over the last three years will surely be surprised that these sentiments could have been voiced by the executive producer of that programme. For the programme is broadly and rightly viewed as relying *extensively* on American expertise, particularly with respect to the interpretation of world news. The programme consists, with astonishing frequency, of talking heads from Washington and, in particular, of ambiguously described experts from Georgetown University (notorious in the United States as a private "think-tank" colonized by the *soi-disant* "intellectuals" of the American New Right). A "special" edition of *The Journal* in the Summer of 1985 on the "Cold War" involved *exclusively* American experts in a

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series of role-playing exercises or crisis games. Quantitative analysis over an extensive period of time would surely reveal that American experts (of largely right-wing persuasion) are given access with far greater frequency than almost all other identifiable organized "constituencies" (other than Ottawa parliamentarians). Systematic and qualitative analysis would also surely confirm that the exchanges between these Washington-based experts and the hosts are generally quite amicable, where much more confrontational and antagonistic exchanges have occurred, in recent memory, with representatives, for example, of the Soviet Union (on the question of East-West arms talks), the British Labour Party (at the time of the General Election of 1983), and with others.

George Bain, in his short article mentioned earlier, spoke of *The Journal's* "chronic" subservience to "what the government says." This may be in some sense a misleading accusation. *The Journal's* editors and journalists have plenty of experience, as do all such close observers of politics in bourgeois democracy, of the corruption and incompetence of individual politicians, and they give full expression to their cynicism at appropriate moments. An enormous amount of time is, indeed, spent on *The Journal* on issues of corruption and competence, and it is presumably via such stories that the journalist retains a sense of the moral project of "political" or current affairs television. But, as in all such crusades against "bad apples", the possibility cannot be allowed that the orchard itself is rotten. The cynicism of occasional pieces on *The Journal* should not be allowed to detract from the narcissistic acceptance that characterizes the programme's view of existing parliamentary, state and capitalist institutions. *The Journal's* consensualism is a version of the "happy news" of the United States; it is a gently resigned acceptance of the world as it is, and an everyday attempt to make the world as it is seem more likeable or benign. So news-stories about the famine in Ethiopia cannot be allowed to slide into discussion of the logic of imperialism in the late twentieth century, though they may cheerfully conclude with mentions of the generous scale of charitable donations being sent by "Canada". Stories about the civil wars being fought in Central America can be presented, without any consistent connection being made between the fundamental attacks now under way on democratic Nicaragua and the overwhelming presence in contemporary Washington of a network of ultra-Right politicians of quite amazing political backgrounds, persuasion and future intentions. The point is always to *reassure* -- rather than activate or even, in the end, really to inform -- the audience.

In other countries (like Britain and France) public sector broadcasting is undoubtedly much more directly politicized than it is in Canada - in the sense that state-run television and radio stations produce what critics have identified as systematically patterned, and ultimately "ideological", current affairs and news programme on behalf of established authority.<sup>17</sup>

The current practices of Canadian public broadcasting are by no means so heavily and systematically politicized; they reflect instead, a much more indirect, psychologistic and discursive conventionalism. From the point of view of true democrats, however, neither use of the "public medium" (whether the direct domination of authority or the depoliticized "talk" of bourgeois personalities) can be a substitute for a representative and accountable system of public information and debate.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Marc Raboy, "Broadcasting Policy and the Public", *borderlines*, 3, pp. 14-17.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Starowicz, "Slow Dissolve: the End of Public Broadcasting?" *This Magazine* 19(1) (April 1985) pp. 4-8.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Knelman, "Their Finest Hour", *Saturday Night* (March 1983), p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Mark Knelman, "The Ghost of *Seven Days* Still Mocks the CBC". *Saturday Night* (October 1975), pp. 43-48.

<sup>5</sup> George Bain, "Why the CBC won't bite where it eats", *Maclean's* (20 December 1982), p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> This use of speed and music to underline the instantaneous character of the "news" being spoken is also characteristic of CBC's *Sunday Morning*, but it was first introduced on the earlier news radio production, *As It Happens*, by the then producer of that programme, Mark Starowicz. For a considered materialist analysis of the interrelationship of speed and form on *Sunday Morning*, see Peter Bruck "Power-format-Radio: A Study of Canadian Current Affairs Radio". Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, McGill University, 1984.

<sup>7</sup> Knelman, 1983, *op cit.*

<sup>8</sup> J. Gattung and M. Ruge, "The Structures of Foreign News," *Journal of Peace Research* 1 (1965) reprinted in S. Cohen and J. Young (eds.) *The Manufacture of News* (London: Constable, 1981).

<sup>9</sup> Brunson and Morley, *Everyday Television - Nationwide*, (London: British Film Institute, CTV Monograph 10, 1978) pp. 4-5.

<sup>10</sup> Stam, "Television News and its Spectator" in E. Ann Kaplan (ed.) *Regarding Television*, (Los Angeles: American Film Institute).

<sup>11</sup> This formulation of the purposes of *The Journal* is attributed to Mark Starowicz and the Heads of Current Affairs and News at the CBC, Bill Morgan and Vince Colin, by Mark Czarniecki, in "The CBC's Daring New Gamble", *Maclean's* (18 January 1982) pp. 38-42.

<sup>12</sup> This, of course, is the hallmark of the interview technique of Ms. Barbara Frum, perfected originally on CBC Radio's *As It Happens*.

<sup>13</sup> In 1982, for example, Barbara Frum conducted an interview with Mr. E.P. Thompson of European Nuclear Disarmament in London. This interview became increasingly heated as Mr. Thompson objected to the speedy and illogical character of the questions which were posed. As a result, the interview was never shown and Canadians were thereby deprived of hearing the views of a key figure in the European peace movement, at that time at the height of its influence.

<sup>14</sup> Knelman, 1983, p. 60.

<sup>15</sup> *The Journal* itself, being the kind of consensual and de-politicized programme I have described, *never* speaks for any kind of interest except for that of "Canada"/"The West"/"Us". The consequences of this abstentionism in the area of women's interests were nowhere more apparent than in the "special" edition of *The Journal* on pornography shown in the Summer of 1982, at the height of the public controversy over pornography on Pay-TV. Rather than illuminate the absolutely key differences that exist between conservative and feminist arguments in favour of censorship and control, *The Journal* chose, predictably enough, to organise its representation of the issue in terms of a simple pro- and anti-censorship dichotomy. It also worked with an entirely *conventional* definition of what constitutes pornography. So viewers were invited to avert their eyes if they did not want to observe what Mary Lou Finlay announced as a sample of "the kind of hard-core pornography" which was under current discussion. There followed a clip in which two apparently mature adults chased each other around a hill-top house in Japan and then began to make love, naked, on a window-seat. So far from being an example of hard-core pornography (involving violence, children, animals, etc.) this particular clip would surely qualify as an example of a film that attempts to represent a mutuality of sexual enjoyment amongst freely-willed adults.

<sup>16</sup> Starowicz, 1985, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> For more extended discussion of British "public sector" broadcasting as an alternative to the CBC version, see the longer version of this paper in Peter Bruck, John Harp, John Shepard, and Ian Taylor (Eds.) *Canadian Cultural Studies* (forthcoming).

Ian Taylor is Professor of Sociology at Carleton University in Ottawa.