Lorna Roth. *Something New in the Air: The Story of First Peoples Television Broadcasting in Canada*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005. 300 pp. Cloth, $75.00; paper, $29.95.

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Lorna Roth examines the success the First Peoples of Canada have had in using the mass medium of television as a tool to counter the negative Indian stereotypes promulgated by Hollywood films, American television, and Euro-Canadian television programming and as a voice to extend their own messages and images to all of Canada.

Roth uses the term "First Peoples" as the most inclusive term that refers to all indigenous peoples inhabiting Canada. The struggles and successes of the First Peoples of Canada form an extraordinary story of the transformation of a relatively small, powerless, stereotyped, essentially marginalized minority into a federally recognized, legal, if not yet quite equal, political player in the media policy arena on par with French and English Canadians.

Roth details this transformation in exquisite detail, beginning with the early media distortions of aboriginal life, most notably in northern Canada. She focuses primarily on the thirty-year period from 1969 to 1999.Telesat Canada was established in 1969. One of its goals was to provide television service to the North. Three telecommunications satellites called Anik, which means "brother" in Inuktitut, launched in 1972, 1973, and 1975.

Programming produced by Euro-Canadians in the South for viewing by Euro-Canadian audiences in the South, portraying Euro-Canadian culture and lifestyles in the South, was also transmitted via satellite to indigenous peoples in the North. One of Roth's earliest research questions was what impact did those mediated messages and images have on the viewers in the North? The North is generally accepted as that region above the sixtieth parallel.

Her research to answer that question supports the limited-effect theory of Katz and Lazarsfeld.[1] Earlier communications theories once held that all media consumers would react in the same way to what were thought to be powerful media messages. Later researchers, such as Katz and Lazarsfeld, found that media audiences were not uniformly, powerfully affected, passive receivers of media messages. Instead, media audiences were active, picking and choosing content that had a limited, or weak, influence on them.

An original intent of extending broadcast programming into the North was to assimilate indigenous cultures into mainstream Euro-Canadian culture. Roth reveals that, instead, the programming helped generate a desire for what researcher Gail Valaskakis calls "cultural persistence," or a rejection of the dominant cultural norm and a desire to retain northern indigenous cultural values and identities.[2]

As the first inhabitants of the land, indigenous peoples had been given special status recognition by the Canadian government. In 1969 the minister of Indian and Northern Affairs proposed a dismantling of special status. While the government was proposing elimination of special status, indigenous culture was absent from programming sent to the North. Media activists fiercely objected and demanded the right for indigenous peoples to originate and broadcast programming based on their cultures and values. They wanted the aboriginal voice to be a part of multicultural Canada.

Incremental broadcast legislation in the 1970s and 1980s finally recognized that the peoples of the North were entitled to programming in their own languages about their own cultural identities and issues. In 1991 the first Native television network, Television Northern Canada, was licensed. This network was unique. There was no other network worldwide dedicated to aboriginal programming.

Soon, in addition to serving the North, the network wanted to broadcast programming to the South. The Broadcast Act of 1999 established the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. This network empowers the indigenous peoples, through sixteen Native Programming Societies, to originate and broadcast programming created by themselves, about themselves, not only to themselves but to the rest of Canada as well. Programs in English, French, and fifteen Native languages introduced indigenous cultures to each other and to the rest of Canada. The Aboriginal Peoples Television Network motto is
“Sharing Our Stories with All Canadians” (224).

Roth sees the Canadian government’s valuing of Canadian cultural pluralism as a model that could extend to other countries. In Canada aboriginal broadcasting has become an integral part of broadcast production and practices. The Canadian government actively supports multicultural and multiracial broadcast services. Indigenous peoples from other nations such as Australia, Japan, Brazil, and the United States have contacted Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. Roth predicts that the network may someday become “an international indigenous broadcasting network” (218).

Through this study of the First Peoples’ ability to gain access to and command mediated communication, Roth identifies weaknesses in the theoretical realms of diffusionist theory and dependency/underdependency theory, both of which she sees as based on Western value systems and Western media imperialism. This case study that traces the establishment of Aboriginal Peoples Television Network adds new dimensions to the theoretical perspectives of political development and community empowerment. The ability to control the message and the images can shape the “general public’s attitudes about First Peoples issues” (14).

Roth describes herself as a “non-native, Jewish, ‘white’ woman” and a “communication rights activist” (8). She has studied, researched, and published about the impact of Canada’s media policies on the Inuit of the North since 1983. She uses empirical and scholarly research as well as field research. She credits Valaskakis with groundbreaking

research that has influenced her own studies.[3] Roth currently is associate professor and chair of the Department of Communications Studies at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec.

The book not only contributes to communications theory, it also illuminates public policy studies. The previously marginalized, disempowered, diverse group of First Peoples was reaching dual objectives. They were gaining power over their ability to maintain and disseminate their culture through mediated communication. Their control of media helped solidify a position as a powerful player in the public policy political arena. This study of the influence of mediated communication on public opinion adds to the discipline of political science as well as mass communication. It supports theories in public policy agenda setting and the relationship between media coverage and public opinion in agenda-setting theory.[4]

Notes

1. Elihu Katz, “On Conceptualizing Media Effects,” Studies in Communication 1 (1980): 119–41; and “Communications Research since Lazarsfeld,” Public Opinion Quarterly 51, no. 4, pt. 2 (1987): S25–S45.

2. Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, “Parallel Voices: Indians and Others—Narratives of Cultural Struggles,” Canadian Journal of Communication 18, no. 3 (1993): 293.

3. Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, “A Communicational Analysis of Interaction Patterns: Southern Baffin Eastern Arctic,” PhD diss., McGill University, 1979.

4. John W. Kingdon, Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies (Boston: Little, Brown, 1984); Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media,” Public Opinion Quarterly (1972): 176–87.