

RESPONSES TO TELEVISION IN TWO SWAMPY CREE COMMUNITIES ON THE WEST COAST OF JAMES BAY

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INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses broad features of the introduction of television in two Swampy Cree communities on the west coast of James Bay in northern Ontario, Canada. The first of these communities is Fort Albany, a village of about 580 Swampy Cree Indians located approximately 100 miles north of Moosonee and Moose Factory, Ontario. Fort Albany was founded between 1675 and 1679 as the third Hudson's Bay Company fur trading post in the James Bay area following the establishment of Rupert's House (Charles Fort) in 1668 and Moose Factory in 1673 (see Anick 1976:244-245; Baldwin n.d.:4-5; and Innis 1970:119). The second community examined here is Attawapiskat, a village of about 1,000 Swampy Cree located approximately 60 air miles north of Fort Albany. Originally a summer fishing site, the modern community of Attawapiskat was established in 1894 as a mission of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, a Roman Catholic order. In 1901 it became the site of a Hudson's Bay Company fur trading post. (For historical and other information about these two communities, see Anick 1976; Baldwin n.d.; Honigmann 1956, 1961; Innis 1970; Maheu 1983; Molohon 1981, 1983; Molohon, ed. 1983; Toohey 1983; and Vézina 1978.)

Today the economy of these communities is based on a combination of government transfer payments, hunting, fishing, and related food-gathering activities, and occasional wage labor. Distinctive bilateral kin clusters and networks form the basis of social organization and decision making in the contemporary villages of Fort Albany and Attawapiskat. These closely structured kin groups have tremendous influence over both their own members and village affairs in general.

In July 1979, microwave transmitters introduced television to Swampy Cree communities on the west coast of James Bay as far north as Attawapiskat. Previously, residents of Fort Albany and Attawapiskat had been exposed to Hollywood-type movies or National Film Board of Canada movies which had been shown by Hudson's Bay Company managers, religious personnel, or private entrepreneurs in their communities since at least the 1950s. In addition, many people had seen movies and television when they visited larger communities in southern Ontario.

Response to the introduction of television was immediate and enthusiastic. As soon as possible, most families in Fort Albany and Attawapiskat purchased Baycrest brand color television sets at their local Hudson's Bay Company stores. Some families even managed to acquire more than one television set, in which case they sometimes explained that "one set is for the living room, and the other is for the bedroom." The fact that many of these newly recruited mass-media fans spoke only Cree did not seem to dampen their enthusiasm for television. Instead, monolingual speakers of Cree often chose (and may still choose) to watch television with the volume turned off or to have their children and grandchildren translate the English dialogue.

The impact of television on these Swampy Cree communities has been considerable. Responses of the recently sedentarized residents of Fort Albany and Attawapiskat to television have tended to fall into six categories:

1. The rate at which children, adults, and even elderly people are learning or improving their English has been accelerated.

2. Consumer patterns have been affected, but not always in ways that might have been predicted.

3. The amount of generalized "knowledge" which Swampy Cree residents hold about North American culture (at least, insofar as North American culture is portrayed on television) has been increased.

4. The "generation gap" which now exists between younger and older residents these communities has been exacerbated. The widening of the gap may be partially due to the fact that television is affecting various age groups differently.

5. Related to the above point may be the recent upswing in juvenile mischief in the communities.

6. Approximately two and one-half years after its introduction, television began to spark an interest in videocassette recorders and the rental of popular movies and other programs for these recorders in Fort Albany, Attawapiskat, and other communities on the west coast of James Bay. Today, weekly orders of rental movies are placed by phone with companies that rent videotapes in Timmins, Ontario, a city of about 30,000 people, nearly 300 air miles south of Fort Albany. The movies, shipped by air freight, are often shared by extended family groups.

Because of space limitations, only the first two categories listed above can be discussed in any detail in this paper.

THE EFFECTS OF TELEVISION ON SPOKEN ENGLISH

Until the introduction of television, most children in the villages of Fort Albany and Attawapiskat entered school speaking only Cree (specifically, the "N" dialect of Swampy Cree). In kindergarten and the primary grades, bilingual Cree and English-speaking teachers' aides helped monolingual English-speaking teachers cope with this situation.

Today, most children entering school in Fort Albany and Attawapiskat are able to speak at least some English in addition to Swampy Cree or "Street Cree." "Street Cree" is the subcultural dialect of Swampy Cree invented by and used among peer groups of youngsters in villages on the west coast of James Bay. However, since Swampy Cree is the language of family and private-life activities in these Cree villages, children's mastery of Cree is often better than their mastery of English until they are about thirteen years old. By this age, they are old enough to participate in a program sponsored by the federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs which enables them to attend grade 9 and the remainder of high school in public schools in southern Ontario. There they are boarded for the school year. Many residents of Fort Albany and Attawapiskat who are now approximately twenty years of age or older state that they did not learn English until they left their villages to attend grade 9 in southern Ontario.

Since television was introduced, older residents of villages on the west coast of James Bay have also increased their knowledge of English. For example, many elderly Swampy Cree are now able to understand far more English and can more easily carry on elementary conversations in English than they could before the introduction of television. From one year to the next, the increased ability of both younger and older residents of these communities to understand and speak English is striking.

CHANGES IN CONSUMER PATTERNS

Television is slowly changing consumer patterns in these Swampy Cree communities. For example, people in Fort Albany and Attawapiskat see many items advertised on television, and then request them at local Hudson's Bay Company stores or privately owned stores in their communities. As soon as "the Bay" or other stores begin to carry these items, they may become "good sellers," or even "best sellers." Most of these items tend to be small, practical, and affordable, as, for example, housekeeping aids, personal hygiene products, and new items of food. Some larger consumer items such as videocassette recorders have also become popular since the introduction of television. Games and blank tapes for videocassette recorders are also being sold. Soon, the Hudson's Bay Company stores and privately owned stores in both Fort Albany and Attawapiskat plan to rent movies for videocassette recorders.

Examples of consumer goods which have either increased in sales or have been introduced to Fort Albany and Attawapiskat as a result of television include household cleaners, kitchen-size plastic garbage bags, room deodorizers, toothpaste, frozen pork sausages, frozen orange juice, 250 milliliter boxes of fruit juice, and fresh fruit.

At the Hudson's Bay Company store in Attawapiskat, toothpaste and frozen pork sausages have increased in sales since television was introduced. Lestoil brand cleaning solution first began to be requested after it was advertised on television, and soon became popular as people in Attawapiskat saw others using it. Another group of housekeeping aids which have become popular in Attawapiskat as a result of television include Airwick brand and other room deodorizers. It may be that the "pine" scent of these deodorizers is liked because it adds an atmosphere to modern Cree homes which is similar to the scent of spruce bough floors used in traditional wigwams or tipis.

Yet another household aid for which there has been an increased demand since the introduction of television is the kitchen-size plastic garbage bag. Termed "wavy bags" after "wavies" or snow geese, they are used for storing geese in freezers. When placed in "wavy bags" before freezing, the geese do not stick together and are much easier to handle. Clearly, the market for "wavy bags" in northern Ontario is assured.

The effect of television on the nutrition of Swampy Cree residents has been considerable. Several new items of food have become popular via television. For example, people serving frozen orange juice in their homes may say, "This is 'Old South' [the brand name], just like you see on television." Since approximately 1982, one-portion-sized, 250 milliliter boxes of apple, orange, grapefruit, and pineapple juice as advertised on television have become popular at "the Bay" and other stores in Fort Albany and Attawapiskat.

In Cree villages, people are often "shopik" (at the store) in order to participate in the many opportunities for networking which are offered by the store setting. In the process, they often buy candy or soft drinks to consume while visiting. For example, the Band chief may drop by "the Bay" in order to be available for private conversations with clients who do not wish to be seen making a special trip to the Band office. The chief may buy a snack, sit down on a packing case, and wait for clients to approach him.

The recent popularity of fruit juice as a replacement for the soft drinks and other sugar-filled snacks which are consumed in the context of "shopik" social networking is an important trend. Today, some of the more nutrition-conscious residents of Fort Albany and Attawapiskat are beginning to discuss the need for decreasing the high sugar consumption of people in their villages. Sugar has long been an important food in this geographic area as a result of the fur trade. Recently, many Swampy Cree people have begun to advocate the substitution of fruit and fruit juices for sugar and sugar products. Although this idea may be partially due to long-term efforts of teachers and nurses in these communities, it has also been fostered by educational information on television. Likewise, recent increases in the purchase of fresh fruits such as apples, oranges, and bananas at Hudson's Bay Company stores in Fort Albany and

Attawapiskat, accompanied by a corresponding decrease in the sales of canned fruits packed in sugar syrup, are probably linked to television. Even when improved air transportation made perishable foods available after construction of modern airstrips by the Ontario Ministry of Transportation and Communications in Fort Albany and Attawapiskat in 1974, fresh fruit did not immediately become popular. It has only become popular since 1979 or 1980.

One consumer item which is both heavily advertised and seen in many other contexts on television is alcohol. The effects of constant television advertisements for beer, plus the many other situations in which television portrays alcohol as an "integral," "normal," or "expected" part of North American culture, remain to be seen. This phenomenon is particularly interesting in view of the fact that both Fort Albany and Attawapiskat are "dry" reserves (where alcohol is prohibited by the Band Councils).

CURRENTLY AVAILABLE TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

Television programming presently available to the residents of Fort Albany and Attawapiskat includes the following:

1. CFCL-CBC TV from Timmins, Ontario, which is an affiliate of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). This station has been received via microwave transmitters in both villages since the introduction of television in July 1979.

2. TV Ontario, an educational channel received via satellite receiving dishes funded by the Ontario Ministry of Northern Affairs. This equipment was installed in Attawapiskat next to the village microwave tower during the summer of 1983, and began broadcasting at about the same time. In 1983, Fort Albany also applied to the Canadian Radio, Television, and Telecommunications Commission for a license for a TV Ontario satellite receiving dish funded by the Ontario Ministry of Northern Affairs. This equipment was installed during the late summer of 1983 and began broadcasting TV Ontario programs to the Fort Albany community somewhat later.

3. A private station owned and operated by the Band Council of Attawapiskat. This station began broadcasting in September 1982, and has a signal strong enough to carry for only a short distance beyond the village.

4. A private station which originates at the Roman Catholic mission in Attawapiskat. This station began operation soon after television arrived in Attawapiskat in July 1979, and has a signal strong enough to carry for only about two miles beyond the village.

CFCL-CBC TV in Timmins, Ontario, carries Canadian Broadcasting Corporation network programs, local programs such as news produced in Timmins, and an impressive number of vintage Hollywood movies. Vintage movies often follow the late evening news and are appropriately titled "Oldie Goldies." The response of the residents of Fort Albany and Attawapiskat to CBC network programs and news broadcasts has generally been one of interest. By contrast, the response to "Oldie Goldies" is mixed. Often, the Swampy Cree are as bored with this type of low-budget television programming as many other Canadians are, and openly say so, especially when the same "Oldie Goldies" are repeated twice in one month, as they sometimes are.

The arrival of an educational channel, TV Ontario, via satellite receiving dishes in Fort Albany and Attawapiskat in 1983 greatly increased the variety of television programming available to residents. In view of the high birthrates for Fort Albany, Attawapiskat, and other Cree communities, the large number of quality programs for children carried by TV Ontario is significant. Also notable is the more realistic portrayal of North American society (and the world in general) on educational television than on regular television. As an alternative for television viewing, TV Ontario should prove highly significant for Cree communities as it is gradually expanded throughout northern Ontario. By the late summer of 1983, TV Ontario had

reached 92% of the population of Ontario and had the potential for wider distribution throughout remote areas of northern Ontario than did the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

An interesting corollary to the arrival of TV Ontario is the establishment of a native language radio network which will eventually link all Cree and Ojibwe reserves in northern Ontario. This comprehensive radio network is being established by the Wawatay Native Communications Society of Sioux Lookout, Ontario. Through this radio network, programs in Cree and Ojibwe will be broadcast via the same Anik C3 satellite used by TV Ontario. Space on this satellite has been donated to the Wawatay radio network by TV Ontario. The new radio network will use the same satellite receiving dishes and transmitters in northern communities as TV Ontario. In the future, it is likely that the Wawatay Native Communications Society will follow the example of Inuit television in Canada's Northwest Territories and Quebec, and produce Cree and Ojibwe television programs as well as radio.

As was the case for TV Ontario, the establishment of a Band-operated television channel in Attawapiskat in the fall of 1982 increased the variety of television programming available to the residents of this community. The Attawapiskat Band channel operates out of two small buildings near the village airport, which also house a Band-owned-and-operated radio station. The Band radio station began broadcasting during the winter of 1981-82, supplementing CBC network radio and other stations received in the village. With volunteer disk jockeys, the Band radio station broadcasts music and news in Cree and English from 6:30 a.m. to midnight daily. In the beginning, backing for the installation of both the Band radio station and the band television channel came from the Wawatay Native Communications Society. Today, operating funds for both stations are raised by the people of Attawapiskat on a continual basis. Approximately every two weeks, the Attawapiskat Band holds raffles or bingo games in John R. Nakogee Elementary School. These projects raise money for videotape rentals, heating, and general maintenance of the combined radio and television stations.

Programming for the Band television channel in Attawapiskat includes up-to-date Hollywood movies rented from National Video, a private firm in Timmins, Ontario, and shown each evening after about 6:30 p.m. and during the afternoons on weekends; broadcasts of Band Council meetings; discussions of platforms among candidates for chief and Band Council during elections; interviews with visiting officials; and many other events televised with the Band's own video camera. The Band channel's up-to-date movies are extremely popular, and care is taken to provide a large selection of Walt Disney productions and other programs of interest to children.

The private television channel which originates at the Oblate Roman Catholic mission in Attawapiskat began broadcasting soon after CFCL-CBC TV arrived in July 1979. The first Catholic mass to be broadcast on this channel was the Christmas mass of December 1980. Since then, the mission channel has broadcast the mass at least once each day. It also broadcasts religious programs such as dramatized portrayals of the lives of Mary, Jesus, and the saints, interviews with important religious personnel who may be visiting Attawapiskat, and family-entertainment movies. To provide variety in their new television format for missionary work, the Oblates exchange videocassette tapes of religious programs, interviews, and family-entertainment movies with other Oblate missions where television broadcasting equipment is in operation.

FAVORITE TELEVISION PROGRAMS

Currently, favorite television programs in both Fort Albany and Attawapiskat fall into the categories of sports programs, soap operas, horror movies, and up-to-date "action" movies. As is true for much of Canada, organized sports (including hockey) are generally of more interest to men than to women in Swampy Cree communities on the west coast of James Bay. Granzberg (1983 and personal communication) has observed that soap operas are favorite

programs in the northern Manitoba Cree communities where he has conducted research on television, and that they are also classic favorites in other indigenous communities of the world where television is available. On the basis of these observations, Granzberg hypothesizes that an intensive interest in soap operas is related to the highly personalized family and social networks portrayed in these programs. In fact, the values and behavior centering around family and social networks as portrayed in television soap operas are strikingly similar to those which form the basis of social organization for Swampy Cree villages on the west coast of James Bay. Despite differences in the physical appearance and life-styles of soap opera actors, the people and events in these programs were immediately familiar to the Swampy Cree when television first arrived in their villages. Furthermore, many of the values and interests portrayed on soap operas dramatize already existing values and interests of the Swampy Cree, and reinforce their identification with strongly entrenched family and personal relationships. For example, major characters in the popular soap opera "Dallas" live in a parent-dominated family compound similar to those of the Swampy Cree, and seem to spend most of their time on highly personalized male-female, family, and friendship relationships. Except for a few differences in life-style, much of what is portrayed on "Dallas" is extremely familiar, and thus of great interest, to the Swampy Cree.

When an older Swampy Cree man in one of the villages under study (who is similar to many of his contemporaries in that he speaks little English and is an avid fan of soap operas with the sound turned off) was asked how he could follow the plots of these programs, he replied that the storylines of soap operas are not difficult to follow. He added, "Anyone who watches soap operas long enough [i.e., continuously] can understand exactly what is going on." It is possible that another reason soap operas are popular among the Swampy Cree and other indigenous peoples is that it is not necessary to know the language in which soap operas are being broadcast in order to "understand" them. That is, soap operas lend themselves to audience identification and participation through audience-imagined dialogues surrounding family and personal relationships in many cultures. Indigenous audiences can literally imagine or "make up" dialogues which both fit the behavior of soap opera actors and reinforce their own interests and values. In fact, Swampy Cree soap opera fans spend as much time as television viewers anywhere else discussing the characters and events seen on soap operas as if these were real and located in their own backyards. These discussions go on regardless of whether the sound on television sets has been left on or turned off. Work schedules in homes, hospitals, and other government agencies in the two communities are often organized so that Swampy Cree fans can watch their favorite soap operas each day.

Favorite television programs in Fort Albany and Attawapiskat such as horror movies and up-to-date "action" movies are of ethnographic interest for several reasons. In the early days of television when both villages had only one channel, horror movies were even more popular than they are today. Currently, Swampy Cree fans who enjoy soap operas also tend to enjoy horror and "action" movies. For example, Swampy Cree television buffs can often describe the details of a large number of horror movies and seem to enjoy discussing which horror movies are their favorites. During the summer of 1982, children in Attawapiskat reported that their favorite television program was "The Incredible Hulk." When asked why they preferred this program, they answered "because of that character."

Horror movies and exciting "action" movies or television programs represent a form of entertainment which is popular throughout rural and frontier areas of Canada and among certain segments of urban populations. On one occasion, CFCL-CBC TV in Timmins featured three different *Frankenstein* movies in the space of about ten days. These movies had large audiences in Fort Albany and Attawapiskat. It may be that an interest in horror and "action" movies represents a kind of "index of acculturation" for the Swampy Cree residents of northern Ontario. By comparison, Granzberg's (1983) search of the literature on types of television programs which are popular among indigenous groups throughout the world has demonstrated that practical, mundane, and moral subjects tend to be preferred over subjects which focus on fantasy. With this in mind, we must ask why the recently sedentarized Swampy Cree Indians of the west coast of James Bay are partial to highly fantastic horror and "action" movies or

television programs. In part, these movies and programs may be popular because, like soap operas, they can be enjoyed without a knowledge of English (or French). However, the matter of language facility may not represent a complete explanation.

Recently, fads or styles which identify membership in specific Cree villages have swept across northern Ontario. Examples of such fads are the extremely popular place-name T-shirts which currently sell in large numbers at "the Bay" in Fort Albany and Attawapiskat, and place-name or "in-group" styles of hats. If viewed as a type of fad, then horror or "action" movies may help mark out an "in-group" identity for the residents of villages on the west coast of James Bay.

Like soap operas, horror and "action" movies are usually most entertaining when viewed in a group setting. Cree people can be very vocal while watching exciting movies in their homes or in privately owned village theaters. During exciting scenes, Cree fans often exclaim in unison, laugh, or otherwise treat the viewing of these movies as a highly social event. Later, discussions of interesting movies may include the rank-ordering of recent movies on a scale where "really good" movies might be any of the classic *Frankenstein* films or others with equally exciting and emotion-provoking formats. The more frightening and emotion-provoking a movie, the more likelihood for audience participation while the movie is being watched and for lively discussion afterwards.

It appears that sports programs, soap operas, and horror or "action" movies tend to be regarded by the Swampy Cree as "social phenomena" which are more fun and entertaining when viewed by groups of people who are able to enjoy the social interaction generated by these events. As mentioned, Swampy Cree discussions of television programs are often highly personalized and may include considerable identification with the main characters. The popularity of sports programs in a culture which stresses physical competence is self-evident. Similarly, the popularity of soap operas can be explained by their transcendence of the English language, as well as their appeal to viewers in a culture that stresses highly personalized family and social networks. However, explanations for the popularity of horror and "action" movies are more elusive. One explanation may be that, like soap operas, they are able to transcend the English language. But it may also be that horror and "action" movies are popular precisely because they are so fantastic that they provide a strong focus for entertainment and social interaction without threatening the values and general orientation of Swampy Cree viewers.

THE PRESERVATION OF SMALL GROUP DISTINCTIVENESS

Milton Freeman (1982:956) has noted that contemporary Inuit who have settled in villages in the Arctic "effectively [maintain] small group distinctiveness in nearly all spheres of activity." In the same article, Freeman demonstrates that one of the consequences of Inuit ability to maintain small group distinctiveness is the preservation of their traditional social, cultural, and linguistic characteristics despite sedentarization in settlements where they now live in close proximity to each other. Extrapolating from Freeman's description of the Inuit, it may be hypothesized that the contemporary television preferences of the Swampy Cree residents of Fort Albany and Attawapiskat reflect cultural *continuity* and a style of acculturation that has existed since contact. Since their contact with Europeans some three hundred years ago, the James Bay Cree have tended to select those aspects of non-Cree culture which benefited their survival as a distinctive cultural group. Today, the James Bay Cree are experiencing many new stresses directly related to sedentarization. If the preservation of small group distinctiveness among the Swampy Cree has helped to preserve their traditional social, cultural, and linguistic characteristics during the process of sedentarization, then it might be predicted that new aspects of acculturation such as popular television programs will continue to follow this pattern. That is, the most popular television programs will be those which are most easily enjoyed by groups of Swampy Cree kin who frequently watch television together in a highly gregarious situation

which will reinforce their solidarity and distinctiveness as an autonomous, closely structured small group.

CONCLUSION

Although at first glance sports programs, soap operas, and horror or "action" movies appear to be widely different in content, these favorite types of television programs fulfill many similar small group identity functions for the recently sedentarized Swampy Cree residents of two villages on the west coast of James Bay. Not only do these favorite television programs provide engrossing entertainment without the need to understand English; they also provide a focus around which highly gregarious family interaction may take place. For example, although horror and "action" movies may seem to provoke extreme emotions or outlandish images in the minds of viewers, they may also facilitate close social interaction between small, intimate groups of Swampy Cree kin. Thus, they may help to reinforce small group distinctiveness and in-group solidarity among Swampy Cree kin. Since strong kinship groups form the basis of social organization and decision making in these Swampy Cree villages, it is likely that "kinship-facilitating" television programs will continue to have the greatest popularity.

Despite the great popularity of television, there are critics in James Bay communities who state that television, radio, and other recently introduced "distractions" have the potential to disrupt Swampy Cree culture and family structure. It is true that sedentarization has been accompanied by important stresses. However, more than three hundred years of contact have failed to assimilate or otherwise destroy the Swampy Cree. It is likely that the James Bay Cree will continue to survive as a distinctive culture and to accept various aspects of non-Cree culture, including television, on their own terms.

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