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# AMERICAN VALUES IN CANADIAN TV: WILL & GRACE

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## Abstract

Mass media is one of the main agents by which individuals socialize values, being TV the strongest element of the mass media because its ability to reach a vast audience. Within the North American Free Trade Agreement framework, Canada tried to protect her cultural industries aiming at preserving its threatened identity by the powerful American entertainment industry, being this identity based primarily on "not being American". In spite of these efforts, Canadians are bombed with the American values through TV shows from their southern neighbour. Specifically, in the case of the sitcom "Will and Grace", transmitted by the Canadian broadcast company CBC during primetime, we are able to see the importance of money as a key part within the attitudes surrounding the American values and thus conclude that despite the efforts of the Canadian government to protect the Canadian society from the enormous cultural package delivered by products from the United States, Canada still is at risk of internalizing the values.

## INTRODUCTION

By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the end of the Cold War and potent influences began to shape the world system, the United States was the last superpower, but it did not exercise global hegemony, being number one does not carry the same weight it once did. The United States wanted globalization on its own terms and by its own rules, North American regionalism was an answer to the US multilateralism frustrations; Canada and Mexico would validate the US credibility (Poitras, 2001: 57-59).

In order to have credibility around the world the US must have it within its region, hence the government needs "train the minds of the people to a virtuous attachment to the government" (Rai, 1995: 22-23). In this case the US government, through its values.

Canada's economy has been drawn into the American orbit, affecting every sphere of Canada's life, from the judicial system to its economic and

cultural structures (Barlow and Clarke, 2001: 199). Because Canada was reluctant to bargain its cultural industries within the free trade framework one might think that the US doesn't have a strong influence on Canadian culture; but we still have their TV shows, which might portray their values; and which are of great importance because they are under the American ideology that serves to legitimate a certain social order, the so-called dominant ideology (Brodie and Rain, 2005: 354).

Moreover, if the United States is delivering an ideology to Canada through television, this would mean that those who feared that free trade would "Americanize" Canada could be right; moreover, the basis under which Canada has partly created its national identity (its relationship with the United States) would have to be redefined. Thus, it is a big concern whether the US is delivering an ideology by portraying its values through their TV shows shown in Canadian networks, which would eventually lead to a changing of Canadian cultural structures.

### AMERICAN AND CANADIAN VALUES

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The United States founding values are liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez faire (Lipset, 1997: 31). Canada has been more class aware, elitist, law-abiding, statist, collectivity-orienting, and particularistic (group-oriented) society. These distinctions date since the American Revolution which led the British North American division (Lipset, 1990: 2). The American values reflect the lack of feudal, monarch and aristocrat structures, giving the opportunity to the U.S. to live without an emphasis on social hierarchy, as it happened in Canada (Lipset, 2000: 17-19). Canada has had a more Tory-monarch history and structures giving greater respect and dependence towards the State, having less criminal rates and litigations.

Canadians have always define themselves more by reference to what they are not (Americans) than in terms of their own national history and tradition. There is no ideology of "Canadianism", comparable to "Americanism" (Lipset, 2000: 3). This is due to the slow evolution of Canada as an independent state, oppose to the American Revolution, the unification of the British North American provinces into the Dominion of Canada in 1867 was not a defiance movement towards the British Empire, the confederation leaders preferred strong ties with Great Britain (*Ibid*: 5).

The United States has a lot more lawless and corruption attributed to the great emphasis on achievement, there is a lot of pressure to succeed by

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“fair means if possible and by foul means if necessary”. The Americans are more concerned about the ends than the means, oppose to the Canadians (*Ibid*: 14). Canada was built upon the *noblesse oblige* values, which is the obligation State leaders have towards the less fortunate members of society.

The American Bill of Rights, opposed to the Canadian Charter of Rights, is highly protective of individuals, and emphasizes on individual rights while the Charter does on collective ones (*Ibid*: 15-16).

The Americans are a more hardworking, capital maximizing population because of economic advantages that they had (bigger markets, slavery, more aggressive, risky and innovative entrepreneurs) in its early beginnings, together with a stronger protestant spirit. Canadians are more hostile than Americans to private enterprise and tend to be savers not investors (*Ibid*: 17-19). Another major difference is that Americans do not trust in their political leaders nor in their institutions, they are proud to be a unified nation.

Special attention shall be paid to «buying influence» as a part of the American values of achievement, which is seen as entirely proper within American cultural and social traditions of free political competition, as oppose to the Canadian *noblesse oblige* values.

Modern based politics is a product of mass consumption, electronic media, polling opinions, marketing and advertising. Many citizens often reduce political values to money, the common dominator of competing demands. Political leaders encourage a private, calculated attitude by referring to taxes because for Americans, money grants your right to speak, the right to have political influence (Mayhew, 1999). But decades ago, liberal-democratic citizenship meant that citizens had to have aid from the welfare State so they could effectively exercise their civil and political rights. T.H. Marshall argues that inequalities and constraints of poverty did not mean individuals had less right to participate (Brodie, 1997: 229). This is now different, if you have money you have a political right to have power and hence you have succeeded.

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## AUDIENCE “IDENTIFICATION” WITH SITCOMS AND DRAMAS

Mass media is one of the main agents by which individuals socialize values, including political ones; being TV the strongest element of the mass media because it reaches a vast audience. Hence, TV is a key player in the delivery of either the American or Canadian values to Canada’s population.

Audiences become absorbed with a sitcom when they identify with some of the characters portrayed; “identification is a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation... as if the events were happening to them”. Identification is strongly linked to the social effects of media. For example, identifying with aggressive characters on TV increase the learning of aggressive behavior of children; TV viewers when discussing reactions in regards of a show, focus on their feelings and reactions to characters (including mentions of strong identification). Identification allows experiencing social reality from other perspective, thus shaping the development of self-identity and social attitudes (Cohen, 2001: 245-246). “Identification requires that we forget ourselves and become the other, that we assume for ourselves the identity of the target of our identification” According to Freud, Wollheim and Bettelheim, identification is an imaginative experience in which a person surrenders consciousness of his/her own identity and experiences the world through someone else’s point of view; it leads to the adoption of an external point of view (*Ibid*: 247-248). Hence, identification is crucial to the socialization and the development of personal and social identities throughout the life cycle.

## 90 WILL & GRACE

Will & Grace is an American sit com with one of the highest ratings in the United States. It is broadcast in Canada by CBC from Monday through Friday during primetime. The plot is about two best friends who live together, a handsome successful gay lawyer (Will) and beautiful, self-employed interior designer (Grace). Grace has a wealthy socialite as an assistant (Karen) who likes working for her because it keeps her down to earth; Will has as a close friend another gay man who although is self-involved has a well-meaning heart .

In order to carry out this research, Will and Grace was watched for a week and its 5 episodes analyzed. Here is an overview of what they were about:

1. A successful gay entrepreneur wants to sell out his company. Will is doing all the legal work and wants to look nice before him so he sets Jack on a date with him, but because he initially refuses, Will pays Jack for the favor. The man and Jack become a couple and together decide the future of the man’s investments Will was supposed to give him

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advice of. Later, he finds out Will paid Jack and ends up the relation. Meanwhile, Grace and Karen spend the weekend at Leo's cabin and find money hidden under the mattress thanks to Karen's skills to "smell" it. Grace gets upset and thinks her husband is hiding money from her so she decides to get even and spend "her" half.

2. Will and Jack go to an Art show because Jack wants to meet a rich gay man to buy expensive things for him. Will is the one who meets the rich gay man and he gives him a lot of gifts until Will tells him to stop because he is a man of values who cannot be bought with money. The rich guy gets offended and stops his friendship with Will. Will looks for him at another art show to apologize and he finds out that he has another "boytoy". Then suddenly he realizes that now he is old enough with enough money to have his own "boytoy". Grace and Karen go to a new restaurant and order noodles to go, the noodles are too hot, Grace drops them and asks for another order; when the waiter wants to charge for the new order Grace gets mad because he didn't warn her that the noodles were hot and asks the new dish for free, when the guy refuses she swears she'll never eat there again and she initiates a campaign against the restaurant. Later she finds Karen eating there and gets disappointed because Karen is supposed to be her friend and stand up for the same things as her. Grace ends up eating in the restaurant again because she really likes the food there and she and Karen make up.
3. Will invites Jack to his cooking classes and Jack invites his boyfriend. The class is full of couples, the only single person is Will who becomes the target of the class jokes until a handsome guy shows up and flirts with him. It turns out that it was a male prostitute hired by the teacher because she felt sorry for him. Jack makes fun of Will because he thinks that it is the only way of finding him someone. Meanwhile Karen's mom moves back to the city and hires Grace to decorate her new home. Karen offers to pay for the decoration but her mom refuses and Grace has a hard time with the tight budget the lady gives her. Grace tries to convince Karen to give her more money telling her that her mother doesn't have to know. Karen refuses because that's not what her mom wanted. Grace ends up doing a great job; everyone loves it, even a lady who offers Karen's mom a huge amount of money for it. Karen's mom sells it and doesn't care about the hard work of Grace, but ends up giving her a bit more money which makes Grace forget about the devaluation of her sacrifice. Will gives Grace the idea of working together,

buying flats, decorating them and then sell them again at a higher price; just like the time when they were in college and Grace used to sell Will's term papers.

4. Karen and her new lover live together very happy at her house. Suddenly, Lorraine, his daughter and former mistress of Karen's late husband has no place to live and moves in with them. Karen is not completely happy but can't say no to her lover. Lorraine is spoiled a lot by her dad and Karen tells him that she needs discipline which he promises will give her. On the other hand, Jack gets a job as a nurse and meets with his former acting professor who is very sick and wants to sell her flat to retire. Will and Grace buy the flat for a very cheap price and decorate it in order to sell it at a high price. Sandra, Jack's former professor misses home and wants her flat back. Will and Grace refuse to sell back making Jack disappointed for their greed. Then Jack and his boyfriend go to the flat to remind them how insensitive they are but his boyfriend likes the flat so much that he offers to buy it so him and Jack can move in together. Jack forgets about Sandra and it's just happy that he is taking the next step with his partner. Will and Grace are also happy that they are getting a lot of profit for the flat.

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5. Karen wants to go to Jamaica but since her husband Stanley is in prison she invites Jack, who cannot go because he has to take care of his son. Grace is invited to her ex boyfriend's wedding and is afraid to go. Grace decides to take Will with her and at the rehearsal the best man asks Grace to say something about the groom and she makes jokes about how childish, immature and irresponsible he is, everyone laughs. Meanwhile, Elliot's mother doesn't want Jack to be involved in his life because he is a bad influence on him. Jack gets very sad so Karen kidnaps Elliot to make him happy again, Jack takes Elliot to her mom's and ask her to please let him be involved in his life, he blames her for being a homophobic but then she confesses she is a lesbian and jealous because Jack was able to tell Elliot he was gay with no problems since the beginning. She finally accepts Jack to be involved in Elliot's life. On the other hand, Will and Grace go to the wedding, Will lies about him being a lawyer because everyone else hates lawyers so he pretends to be a professional tennis player but there is another professional tennis player at the party and Will is afraid he might be caught in his lie. Fortunately the other guy also was pretending to be something he is not because he has a hated job as well; everything turns out to be just fine

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for both of them. Grace seems to be having fun until she finds the bride in the washroom trying to escape from getting married after she heard Grace's speech about Danny. Grace finally convinces her to get married with Danny and gets sad because of losing him, only until he sees Danny being childish again.

Throughout these five episodes we see the predominance money has in the plot, how it plays as a key element to the characters with interpersonal relations (friendship and love) and that is at first instance hidden under the disguise of "good" morals and values, but in reality they are working together to make money look like Leo Mayhew says, "the one thing required to have the right to speak, to have power and influence". We see how the characters feel much better when out of a bad situation they rely somewhat on their material possessions to feel better; of course friendship is also important but money still plays an important role within it.

A clear example is how on episode 4 Jack forgives his friends for not returning the apartment to Jack's acting professor when his boyfriend offers to buy it for them to live there as a couple. Another example is when on episode 2 Will ends up feeling good after being rejected to continue on being a rich old man's "boytoy" because now he has enough money to have one of his own. Also, on episode 3 when Karen's mom hires Grace under a low budget to decorate her house, Karen refuses to pay for it because then she'd prove her mom loves her because of her and despite her money, we see that hard work without a good material reward is not worthy, Grace doesn't feel appreciated until Karen's mom sold the apartment to another person and gave her a part of the money which is not the first time Grace feels she is not taken into account; on episode 1 she gets mad at her husband for hiding money from her and gets even spending her "legitimate half".

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## CONCLUSIONS

Will and Grace definitely portray the American values, especially the ultimate value that the nation attributes to money as means of having the right to be heard. This particular way of regarding money in relation to the worth of a person is not shared by the Canadian values, it is actually completely opposed to it on the grounds that Canadians feel that the State has an obligation towards the less fortunate members of society in spite of their buying influence; and they don't share the thought of achieving success by "fair



means if possible and by foul means if necessary” either of which is clear within “Will and Grace”.

As mentioned above, the socializing of the values audiences identify with in regards of a TV character is an important outcome of the television, and it is currently of major importance due to the American influence through its cultural industries. Audiences may not identify completely with these values but, as mentioned before, when an individual has at least a thing he/she identifies with the character, then his/her attitudes within society will tend to be a little like the ones the TV character has. Hence it is possible that Canadians may start having some American attitudes if the programming they most commonly watch is American and “Will and Grace” is a hit sit com that reaches many people, thus it may be having some influence to them.

The thin line that divides Americans from Canadians may become even more diffuse if Canadians start socializing their southern neighbor values and attitudes, “Will and Grace” is just one show hence is not a great threat but if we combine the whole other American shows together, then Canada might have a problem: having to redefine its national identity. It would be interesting to have further analyses of hit TV shows and make a comparison of them in order to make a more accurate statement of the issue Canada most probably is about to have, in spite of its weak efforts to protect itself.

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