

Research in Brief

The Audience “Talking Back”: Alan M. Thomas’ Educational Television Experiment in Democratic Decision-Making

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ABSTRACT In 1959, adult educator Alan M. Thomas outlined a pioneering concept of the active broadcast audience in Canada. Thomas affirmed that the audience’s potential to be a force for two-way communication and direct democracy had been unfulfilled. Twenty years later, Thomas put this concept into practice. As president and chair of the Canadian Association for Adult Education, he developed a participatory television series with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation called *People Talking Back*. The six-part series was an activist experiment in democratic decision-making to facilitate social action and learning outside of formal educational institutions. This Research in Brief brings together Thomas’ concept of the audience with his adult educational broadcasting scholarship and research on *People Talking Back*, all of which have remained relatively unrecognized by communication scholars.

KEYWORDS Adult educational television; Audience; Broadcasting history; Communication activism; Direct democracy

RÉSUMÉ En 1959, l’éducateur d’adultes Alan M. Thomas a initié une approche pionnière envers le public des médias au Canada. Selon lui, on n’avait pas encore développé le potentiel de ce public d’être une force en communication bidirectionnelle et en démocratie directe. Vingt ans plus tard, Thomas a pu mettre son initiative en œuvre. En effet, en tant que président de la Canadian Association for Adult Education, il a créé avec la Société Radio-Canada une émission de télévision participative intitulée *People Talking Back* (« Les gens répondent »). Cette série activiste de six épisodes a expérimenté la prise de décision démocratique dans le but de faciliter l’apprentissage et l’action sociale de ses téléspectateurs hors du cadre d’un établissement d’enseignement formel. Cette Recherche en bref établit un lien entre la conception du public formulée par Thomas et l’étude de celui-ci relative à *People Talking Back* de la radiodiffusion appliquée à l’éducation des adultes. Les initiatives de Thomas ont reçu jusqu’à présent peu d’attention de la part des chercheurs en communication.

MOTS CLÉS Télévision éducative pour adultes; Spectateurs; Histoire de la radiodiffusion; Activisme en communication; Démocratie directe

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Introduction

On Saturday, November 21, 1959, Alan Miller Thomas presented a paper entitled, "Audience, Market and Public: An Evaluation of Canadian Broadcasting," before the Vancouver Institute at the University of British Columbia. In his paper, subsequently published in 1960, Thomas proposed a pioneering concept of the broadcast audience in Canada. Twenty years later, he put this concept into practice. As president and chair of the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE), a non-profit voluntary organization, Thomas helped launch the six-part television series called *People Talking Back (PTB)* in cooperation with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), the country's national public broadcaster. *PTB* debuted on Sunday, February 4, 1979, with a special three-hour episode that introduced the subthemes of the five subsequent half-hour episodes (J.R. Kidd fonds, 1979). It provided Canadians with an opportunity to debate issues on television and participate in post-broadcast discussion groups that informed the subject matter of future episodes.

Although Thomas has long been recognized for his scholarship and activism in the field of adult education, he is a little-known figure in communication studies. A small body of communication scholarship has concisely outlined or applied Thomas' (1960) concept of the broadcast audience (e.g., Eaman, 1994; Raboy, 1990), and briefly acknowledged that *PTB* was a pioneering model of "participatory or interactive media" (Beattie, 1981, p. 46). However, more research is needed to comprehensively understand the opportunities and challenges in producing activist television projects such as *PTB*, which can be magnified by Thomas' concept of the audience. Thomas directly critiqued the assumption of some scholars that broadcast audiences are inherently passive and proposed the idea of connecting audiences to broadcasters via the telephone even before the CBC Information Radio Revolution began in 1965 (Canada, 2003, pp. 189–191).

Building on this literature, this Research in Brief introduces Thomas' concept of the audience and his commitment to adult educational television. It then assesses the concept by examining why and how the CAAE and CBC produced *PTB* and how the audience received this televisual "experiment in democratic decision making" (J.R. Kidd fonds, 1979). Thomas conceived of *PTB* to make the audience articulate and facilitate social action in what he called the "learning society": lifelong and continuous learning outside and independent of formal educational institutions (Thomas, 1963). Although *PTB* transcended the limits of formal educational institutions, it fell short in several respects, namely due to the centralization of the television production process and the audience's lack of influence and control in the programming. This argument is substantiated with evidence from Thomas' untapped writings, CAAE documents on *PTB*, and an unpublished *PTB* audience questionnaire.

The broadcast audience and adult educational television

According to Thomas (1960, 1964), broadcasting created its own social form—the audience. He explained that through legislation, the federal government's responses to various royal commissions had historically "restricted broadcasting in its freedom to participate in political events" (Thomas, 1964, p. 405). The government had adopted a one-way model of communication, basing broadcasting on the assumption that the

audience was passive. The government had thus not taken seriously the possibility, afforded by broadcasting, that the audience could "participat[e] in collective decisions" and actively contribute to the "democratic process" (Thomas, 1964, p. 405).

Yet, the audience had the potential to be active and responsible. As Thomas (1964) explained, "The first step would be to assist in making the audience in Canada articulate, and relating it to the process of decision making in broadcasting" (p. 438). For Thomas (1964), "open-line" radio programming was one "device for making the audience articulate not only in terms of broadcasting matters but in terms of matters affecting the whole community" (p. 427). By phoning into a station during a broadcast, the audience could shape program content and create inter- and intra-community conversations across a nation. As Thomas (1964) put it, "The nature of the program is to a large degree in the control of the Audience, since it can be altered by a phone call Broadcasting is an instrument for maintaining constant two-way contact with a society" (p. 407). By linking the audience to decision-making via open-line programs, "[p]rogramming would become an explicit relationship between ... a station and its audience" (Thomas, 1960, p. 23). Broadcasting could then bring us closer to "direct democracy" by fostering a "new, more active public" (p. 23) that maintains a *constant* two-way model of communication.

Accordingly, Thomas (1967) was interested in the enormous "instructional potential of television" (p. 59) for adult learners for two reasons. First, the medium creates "new student bodies and new learners" (p. 59). Unlike the print-based, child- and youth-centred formal educational system, television is more accessible to mature adult learners who are geographically "dispersed" (p. 54) throughout a country and cannot afford to pay for postsecondary education. Hence television can provide "modes of learning to a large 'unschooled' portion of the population" (Thomas, 1964, p. 429). Second, television offers the "key instrument for relating learning to community and social action, the context in which the great bulk of adult learning has always taken place" (Thomas, 1967, p. 59). Television would thus become Thomas' preferred medium to test his concept of the audience. An open-line television series could foster an active public by connecting the audience to decision-making in programming and linking learning to community and social action. Specifically, open-line television could create an active public by giving the audience more control over programming, and broadcasters could maintain constant, two-way contact with adult learners.

People Talking Back

Thomas' concept of the audience informed the CAAE's plan to develop *PTB*, which was laid out in a motion passed by the CAAE Board on June 24, 1977 (Thomas, 1977). In the motion, the Board proposed, "THAT [sic] the Association request the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to undertake a series of Canada-wide television programs devoted to the present political crisis in Canada so that Canadians may understand and participate more effectively in its resolution" (cited in Thomas, 1977, p. 1). The CAAE had begun planning *PTB* in December 1976 to tackle what Thomas (1977) called a "crisis in confederation." On November 15, 1976, the Parti Québécois won the Québec provincial election and intended to hold a referendum on sovereignty. *PTB* was thus initially envisaged as an activist learning experiment and broadcast undertaking to ad-

dress this perceived threat to Canadian unity within and beyond the province. As will be mentioned below, *PTB* focused on unity and an array of other issues. Thomas (1977) ultimately envisioned *PTB* as a grassroots activist project by “reforging an old alliance between adult education and broadcasting” institutions (p. 2).

From 1939 to 1966, the CAAE and CBC collaborated on the series called *National Farm Radio Forum*, *Citizens’ Forum*, and *The Sixties* (Allan, 2015). These radio and television series included hosted panel discussions that invited the studio audience to participate. The broadcast audience, consisting of public interest organizations and ordinary people, was provided with supplemental printed materials about the episodes’ topics and was encouraged to form post-broadcast discussion groups. Their discussions and written feedback via mail informed the content of future episodes.

Open-line radio programs also have a longer history in Canada. In May 1965, CBC English Radio launched *Cross Country Checkup*, beginning a long process of what was known as the Information Radio Revolution (Canada, 2003, pp. 189-191). *Cross Country Checkup* was Canada’s first open-line or “national phone-in show, which allowed listeners to instantaneously hear the opinions of other Canadians from anywhere in the country” (Canada, 2003, p. 189). In May 1970, journalists Peter Meggs and Doug Ward recommended in the “CBC English Radio Report” that the open-line radio format be adopted across the country so that it could reach its full potential (Canada, 2003, pp. 189-190). Apart from being on television, *PTB* built on the Forum and Radio Revolution formats by combining the phone-in component, post-broadcast discussion groups, and participation of ordinary people and public interest groups.

In developing *PTB*, the CAAE and CBC relied on public input, leading them to expand the series’ focus. On June 29, 1978, the CAAE Board held a general assembly in Toronto with 60 leaders from national organizations (J.R. Kidd fonds, 1979). The CAAE also appointed a project management group (PMG) to coordinate *PTB* and invited comments from the general public regarding the direction of the series. Chaired by Thomas, the PMG initially consisted of 15 members from across Canada. One key idea that emerged from the general assembly that the PMG addressed was the need to establish a grassroots organizational structure, linking the provincial counterparts of the interested national organizations (e.g., 4-H Clubs and the YMCA) with the CAAE’s provincial counterparts.

In July 1978, the CAAE reported in a *PTB* newsletter that the series had “three common objectives” (J.R. Kidd fonds, 1979). First, *PTB* would contribute to “a greatly increased understanding, on the part of individual Canadians of the economic, political and social crises through which we are passing.” Second, the series would create “an enhanced opportunity to consider and participate in making responses to these crises.” Third, *PTB* would “creat[e] an opportunity for Canadians to consider *at the same time* the various issues which we face as a people” (emphasis in original). The CAAE ultimately conceived of *PTB* as an “experiment to democratize television.”

In September 1978, Dolores Macfarlane, executive producer of *PTB*, consulted with various adult educational councils and public interest groups across Canada to explain the broadcaster’s role in the series and generate ideas for episode content (Milnthorp, 1979). She met with 989 people in groups of between five and forty. Representatives

from community colleges, universities, wheat pools, school boards, and government departments were among the groups involved in the project (J.R. Kidd fonds, 1979). As a result of these consultations, the CAAE and CBC eventually considered a wider range of issues rather than only national unity. Other issues included unemployment, the economy, politicians and the media, and the country's political future. Thousands of local discussion groups would be linked across the nation through television broadcasting to debate critical issues and share their opinions.

To encourage audience participation, four forms of feedback were incorporated into *PTB*: first, satellite links from production centres to community representatives in each province; second, telephone calls from discussion groups and individuals reporting three five-word "Talkback" action statements to feedback centres; third, written reports of discussions that could be mailed in; and fourth, filmed on-the-street interviews with Canadians (J.R. Kidd fonds, 1979; Milnthorp, 1979). This overall vision for *PTB* echoed Thomas' (1960, 1964, 1967) belief that, by building a direct relationship between the producer (the CAAE and CBC) and audience (discussion groups), television could be used as a tool to link adult learning to community and social action. This relationship was the key factor in making the audience articulate, thereby facilitating constant, two-way communication.

PTB audience reception research suggests that, although the series was an attempt at realizing an articulate audience, it fell short in several respects. Robert Nixon (1979) collected data from 128 questionnaires, representing 67 groups (totalling 481 group participants) and 61 individuals from all provinces but Alberta and Saskatchewan. He found that "the majority of participants" considered *PTB* "a way to *learn* and *communicate* with others about important issues, rather than learn about issues in the usual one-way mode of television" (p. 2, emphasis in original). Most participants also viewed *PTB* as an "*idea sharing* process, and not just an *information receiving* experience" due to the Talkback action statements and studio audience discussions (p. 3, emphasis in original). This feedback implies that *PTB* facilitated learning outside of formal educational institutions.

However, the *PTB* audience still felt that the participatory aspects of the series were limited due to discussion group disintegration and constraints in the post-broadcast discussions. Many discussion groups stopped meeting after two or three episodes because the viewing times of the broadcasts were inconvenient and group members lacked interest in the series (Nixon, 1979). About 75 percent of participants reported that the five 30-minute episodes met their expectations only partially or did not meet them at all. One major reason for their dissatisfaction was that these episodes provided "little opportunity for input from discussion groups" (p. 2). Most discussion groups did not phone in following the episodes, feeling constrained by the five-word limit of the Talkback summary. These findings imply that the audience had limited control over decision-making in the programming. Finally, almost no groups took specific on-the-ground actions as a result of their *PTB* discussions. In general, then, the series did not translate learning into community and social actions.

Toward broadcasting as non-institutional learning

Although *PTB* did not inspire groups to take on-the-ground actions, it was still an ac-

tivist endeavour as per Thomas' (1963) approach to "lifelong learning" because it facilitated continuous learning. According to this approach, educational research and teaching are inherently activist endeavours regardless of the setting in which they take place. Nevertheless, by developing *PTB*, Thomas negotiated the institutional setting in which his activist learning project was made: from formal educational institutions, typically guided by an approach to learning targeted to children and youth in primary and secondary education, to broadcasting, which was amenable to adult education. Thomas also negotiated the scale of his activist endeavour: from formal education, which was geographically and economically exclusive and restrictive, to more inclusive nationwide broadcasting. Finally, Thomas negotiated the communication tools typically used in formal and higher educational institutions: he incorporated not only print and oral communication but also broadcasting into the *PTB* project.

By relying on new technological advancements in television such as satellite switching, Thomas' approach seemingly offered opportunities to facilitate a constant, two-way model of communication and enable the audience to have control over the programming. Thus, *PTB* was a direct critique of the assumption that broadcast audiences were passive and it was a critique of formal educational institutions. However, the institutional barriers within broadcasting and non-formal learning organizations—the centralization of the production process and control of the producers—limited the audience's control over *PTB* programming. These constraints may explain the lack of actions taken as a result of the series.

Due to this inaction, it may not seem surprising that *PTB* was the final CAAE-CBC collaboration, marking the end of what Marc Raboy (1990) calls "social action broadcasting" (p. 77). The *PTB* finale was confirmation that the CBC had absorbed the Forum and open-line programming formats and that public interest groups would no longer be directly involved in such programming, except in advisory roles. The CBC had transformed social action broadcasting into public affairs broadcasting. *Cross Country Checkup* and *As It Happens*, which were ushered in by the Information Radio Revolution, had become exemplars of the public affairs model (Canada, 2003, pp. 189–191). In examining this model, future research could consider what lessons the CBC learned from producing *PTB*.

More broadly, this Research in Brief has implications for thinking about how Thomas' concept of the audience and *PTB* can help us better understand efforts to create a national public sphere in broadcasting. It also has practical significance for communication scholars undertaking activist endeavours. Further research and activist broadcasting initiatives must determine how the audience can have more influence in, and control over, programming, and take actions as a result of such projects. To overcome broader institutional barriers in television production, the case of *PTB* suggests that, as part of a continuous experiment to link learning to community and social action, open-line television must be reimagined as not merely two-way communication and learning outside of formal educational institutions but rather *non-institutional learning*. To foster non-institutional learning and overcome the false sense of inherent audience control within the two-way communication model, the television production process must be decentralized. The audience could then have a constant role in deci-

sion-making processes, foster a new, active public, and ultimately contribute to direct democracy.

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