DEMOGRAPHICS AND CULTURAL CONSUMPTION

Interview with Kaan Yigit

How do you define Canadian culture? How would you assess the state of Canadian culture? In what ways has the growing diversity in the composition of Canada changed the definition of Canadian culture?

We need to define culture broadly. It is the sum of all the elements that make up our Canadian lifestyle – our work ethic, our play ethic, art, music, literature, but also our attitude towards our fellow Canadians – be they our children, our elders, our neighbours across the country, and our attitude towards the environment we inhabit and other cultures around the world.

At the same time, we need to avoid elitist clichés that define culture, such as defining culture as opera or theatre and hip hop or video games as marginal youth noise.

Canadian culture is in transition in a more substantive way than it has ever been for a long time – and of course one major reason for this is the sustained immigration levels of nearly 1 million new Canadians every four years since the early 90s. Canada is a nation of immigrants but we have not experienced such significant numbers before. The second driver of this transition is new technology that allows young Canadians to become their own programmers of cultural content.

The growing diversity of Canada is changing the definition of Canadian culture from an anglo/franco colonial lens to a culture of *fusion* – taking the best elements from a range of different cultures and making something new. To me, this is the essence of the Canadian story going forward. On the world stage, we are known for working cooperatively – and with our experience of dealing with different cultures comes an ability to manage change in a relatively embracing manner.

Has Canadian culture successfully responded to the challenge of the diversification of Canada's population?

Culture is responding at its own pace as it blends and morphs – the pace of change is faster at the street level and slower in Canada's cultural institutions. Much of what passes as cultural discourse is unfortunately the old Canada talking to itself.

What are the particular areas in which cultural expression is strongest in the country and where do you think that it is weakest? In the areas of weakness, what do you think needs to be done to improve things?

Cultural expression is strongest in the areas relating to pride and support of heritage identity. We have been become sophisticated in our understanding that the validation of a person's identity is important to their well being. This is reflected in our policy of multiculturalism.

While there is definitely a Canadian music, film and design sensibility – and while Canadian artists and creators on the world stage have been able to harness the fusion elements of Canadian culture – we are weak in incorporating the importance of the aesthetic in our education system. There is limited inclusion – let alone emphasis – on all of the subjects that support it past grade school. Since creativity, design and *aesthetics* are what distinguishes exemplary products in this day and age (think iPod), we are not supporting our ability to compete globally if we do not properly support this aspect of education.

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To also touch on an area of imminent impact, we have also been tremendously weak in developing our Internet *content* infrastructure, and by default our citizens are consuming content from elsewhere because little is available at home.

Who should take the lead role in promoting the growth and development of Canadian culture?

Given the economics of Canada (small market next to the world's leading producer of cultural products), the government should continue to take an active role in piloting new ways for school boards, private sector interests and public organizations to participate in cultural projects. In regions and situations where public participation is limited (where poverty consumes energy and effort, for example), the government should step in and lead. However, currently government is not accessible in a meaningful way at the grassroots level. For example, the time and energy required to fill out all of the paperwork for government grant/support programs is often staggering.

How can the Government of Canada best support the efforts of organizations that contribute to culture?

The government can best support contributions to culture as an *enabler*. Seed money and financing should be made available with the input of a panel of representatives from across the country but with a process designed to be more accessible and less bureaucratic than what is available currently. The Internet provides a way to distribute the materials required in a timely manner and can also help with the administration of the evaluation and grant process in a cost-effective and time-efficient manner.

Priority support should be available to new forms of creative expression unleashed by the emerging *broadband culture*, which is increasing in importance exponentially in Canadians' lives.