

The Tradition of Canadian Communication Theory

By Leslie Regan Shade

The early American tradition of communication theory was epitomized by the Chicago School (John Dewey, Robert Park) and the functionalists (Harold Laswell, Paul Lazarfeld, Kurt Lewin, Carl Hovland, Wilbur Schramm) (see the Hamilton chapter in *Mediascapes*). This tradition can be characterized by a transmission view of communications, which sees communication as market-driven. This is also a transportation model, which is concerned with moving static goods—for instance, information as a product and a commodity—over vast distances (Rogers, 1997). Characteristics of the transportation model include a tendency toward a centralization of decision-making and authority while decentralizing work; the dominance of global corporations over local organizations; and a consequent homogeneity of participants and content. Recent Canadian policy on the “information highway” (see the Bryant and Smith chapter in *Mediascapes*) is of the transmission view.

Communications technology and theory has been important to Canada and Canadians because of the importance of its vast geography, its geographical proximity to the U.S., and its cultural and bilingual diversity. B.W. Powe wrote, in *A Tremendous Canada of Light* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1993):

I perceive communication to be the value of Canada, a state where understanding and misunderstanding, where constant negotiation and the limits of language, coexist. We have had to learn how to contact one another over an enormous land space, across five and a half time zones, in what was a wilderness of scattered settlements. Technology forges connections and disconnections here.

Canadian communication studies has constantly grappled with issues of cultural sovereignty. (Can culture colonize minds? Is cultural sovereignty a necessary condition for political sovereignty?) The U.S., as a dominant cultural creator and exporter of media products, is generally unsympathetic to these arguments, as current culture and trade debates indicate (see the chapter by Shade in *Mediascapes*).

“Technological nationalism,” according to Robert E. Babe (1990), is one federal response to dealing with these debates. Communication technologies, from radio and television broadcasting to the Internet, have been conceptualized by policymakers and pundits as a mechanism for Canada to exert a unique national identity and, more recently, as a conduit to competing in the global economy. Arthur Kroker, in *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant* (Montreal: New World Perspectives, 1984: pp. 7–8), put this idea of technological nationalism in a historic perspective when he wrote:

What makes the discourse on technology such a central aspect of the Canadian imagination is that this discourse is situated midway between the future of the New World and the past of European culture, between the rapid unfolding of the “technological imperative” in American empire and the classical origins of the technological dynamo in European history. The Canadian discourse is neither the American way nor the European way, but an oppositional culture trapped midway between economy and history.

The Toronto (or Canadian) School of Communication

The Toronto School of Communication created a discourse on technology that was more concerned with the overall mediating effects of technology on social, political, and economic life. It was dubbed the Toronto School because both Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan taught at the University of Toronto. Their research pointed out that a history of media and communications technologies is central to a history of civilization. Both theoreticians distinguished between oral, literate, and electronic societies. McLuhan was interested in the psychological and physiological effects of media, whereas Innis was interested in the socioeconomic–cultural and material effects of media.

Harold Adams Innis: A Brief Biography

Innis was an economist trained at the University of Toronto, where he was chair of the Department of Political Economy from 1937 to 1952. A well-known and respected Canadian academic, he was appointed to the Royal Society as well as to various royal commissions. His books include *A History of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (1923), *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1930), *The Cod Fisheries* (1940), *Empire & Communications* (1950), and *The Bias of Communication* (1951).

What Were Innis's Main Points?

Innis's interest in transportation and economic history encouraged him to study communications. For instance, when studying the route of the Canadian Pacific Railroad (CPR), he examined the migration patterns of immigrants and the role of various communications media in that migration and discovered that migration occurred close to railway and telegraph access. He then looked at the relationship between culture and communication media by posing two questions: (1) What causes change in cultures and social institutions? and (2) What promotes cultural and social stability? He recognized the central role that communications media played in influencing consciousness, social organization, and cultural expectations. Innis historically reviewed the types of control inherent in various communications media, through the communication thesis.

Communication Thesis, or the Bias of Communication: This is explicated in his *The Bias of Communication*. This is a theory of competing media that looked at how communication is biased in terms of its control over time or space. This refers not only to the characteristics of media but to the types of social institutions and cultures they engender. Thus, media are divided into two “biases”: time-binding media and space-binding media.

Time-binded media

Primary mode of communication: preliterate, tribal, oral, speech

Media: stone, clay

Media characteristics: durable, limited distribution potential

Cultural interests: emphasizes continuity with the past; knowledge remembered is very practical, not abstract or trivial

Institutional organization: traditional authority, hierarchical

Space-binding media

Primary mode of communication: print; later, electronic media

Media: papyrus, paper; later, electronic

Media characteristics: transportable

Cultural interests: scientific, individual, impersonal in relationships; high value to abstract reasoning; control over space is important; linear – rational – detached – not tied to tradition

Time is to be broken up into discrete and profitable chunks

Institutional organization: militaristic society, bureaucratic societies, expansion and control commercialism, empire, technocracy

Monopolies of Knowledge: In *Empire & Communication*, Innis constructed a model to explain how a change in forms of communication can lead to the fall of monopolies of knowledge. According to Innis, each mass medium is controlled by an elite (in our time, we think of Rupert Murdoch, Ken Thomson, Ted Turner, Bill Gates, etc.), which controls what knowledge and information gets disseminated.

Notions of Dependency: Innis was concerned about the influence of U.S. culture over Canadian culture. He served on many royal commissions (including the Massey Commission, known as the Royal Commission on Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences in 1949). Innis made strong pleas for the continuance and sustenance of Canadian culture. Dependency theory in media analysis can be traced to Innis. (Other theorists that continued this tradition included the Canadian Dallas Smythe, Herbert Schiller, and Colleen Roach, particularly through their analysis of the New World Information and Communication Order—NWICO; see the Karim chapter in *Mediascapes*.)

How Has Innis Been Taken Up in Current Technological Debates?

Innis's model of communication bias inserted an historical approach to communication studies, asking: what are the processes that are involved in the relationships between social and technological development? Innis's concept of the communication bias also introduced the notion of political power into the analysis of media.

Heather Menzies, in *Whose Brave New World? The Information Highway and the New Economy* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 1996), advocates a community (or ecological) model of communications (in contrast to the transmission model, described above). The community model sees communication as a dynamic social and cultural process; involves localities as compared to the global or corporate perspective; and is more holistic. Using Innis's theories, Menzies argues that the current discourse (and action) taken on the "information highway" is structurally biased by (1) favouring cheap, fast, long-distance communication, thus strengthening the relations between the centres and the margins and weakening everything in between (globalization and virtual corporations); (2) centralizing decision-making and authority while decentralizing the location of work (telework, work-centres, contractual and contingent work); (3) speeding economic and social processes—the faster and more global communications gets, the more the local is relegated to the sidelines.

Robert E. Babe (2000) illustrates Innis's relevance to today's issues through four points. He asks:

- (1) Are new media developed primarily by those on the periphery (as Innis contended) or those at the centre? For instance, consider the development of the Internet by the military–industrial establishment and current global conglomerization.
- (2) Do modern developments in communication technologies erase “considerations of time as continuity” and “communication as a means to empire”?
- (3) Cultural ecology: Does this model have currency today? This model posited by Innis basically says that “the means of communication and the messages circulating in society at any given time constitute what we might call a ‘cultural ecology,’ that is a mindset or a shared system of meanings characterizing a culture” (p. 87).
- (4) The current discourse on information technology is very deterministic and “technologically imperative”: advanced networked societies are the key to a knowledge-based economy. Innis was cautious about such imperatives and reliance on technologies.

Marshall McLuhan: A Brief Biography

Marshall McLuhan was born in Edmonton, Alberta, in 1911. Educated at the University of Manitoba and Cambridge, he joined the University of Toronto in 1946 as a professor of literature, and ended his career there as director of the Centre for Culture and Technology. During the 1960s he published a number of books that won him worldwide acclaim. They include *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (which won the Governor General's Award for Literature in 1962); *Understanding Media* (1962); and *The Medium Is the Massage* (1967), which made “McLuhanese” a part of our everyday language.

McLuhan was one of the first scholars to shift his attention to the study of communication—departments of communication were very rare in the 1950s and 1960s, and only in the 1970s and 1980s did they become more popular in universities (see the Dorland essay in *Mediascapes*). During the 1960s McLuhan experienced his greatest popularity. He popularized the study of communication and media and used the media to exploit his ideas. He was described as ingenious, imaginative, a guru, and a prophet of the new media. He was the subject of serious TV panels and shows, Hollywood, magazines, and street culture. Daniel Czitrom, in *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (University of North Carolina Press, 1982), wrote:

McLuhan's analysis of modern media has profoundly transformed our perceptions of twentieth-century life, particularly for the generation born after WWII. When the French coined the term “mcluhanisme,” they were referring not only to a new cultural stance, a commitment to the serious examination of popular culture. If nothing else, McLuhan's efforts instilled an urgent awareness of the media environment as a basic force shaping the modern sensibility.

Biographies of McLuhan include *Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger* (Toronto: Random House, 1989), by Philip Marchand; *Marshall McLuhan: Escape into Understanding* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1997), by W. Terence Gordon; *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), by Donald Theall; and *Marshall McLuhan: Wise Guy* (XYZ Publishing, 2001), by Judith Fitzgerald.

What Were McLuhan's Main Points?

McLuhan began his investigation of what he called “sensory bias” with the notion that each medium has its own specific grammar, which determines the way things are thought about. He argued that media operate like languages. The grammar of a medium is thus derived from two related elements: (1) the use of senses to receive the medium and the degree of data definition (or clarity of information) provided by the medium, and (2) the clarity of the information provided by a medium. In order to describe this medium, McLuhan adopted the use of the terms “hot” and “cool.”

Hot

high in definition
provides a lot of data through sensory channel
little participation
photography, radio, print

Cool

low in information
little data
requires use of many senses
TV, film

The Medium Is the Message

Media do not simply convey information but structure and alter the environment.

Media shape society.

Media encompass previous media within their own scope.

Media structures thought in a way that content can't.

Must ask: How do media work and how do their technical refinements shape both our mediated world and our sensory reception?

Paul Heyer, in *Communications & History* (Greenwood, 1988), wrote that “a fundamental thesis of *Understanding Media* is that communications media constitute a pervasive environment that saturates us with a whole series of perceptions of which we are largely unaware. McLuhan argues that environments are invisible and that it takes a profound and unconventional shock to discover and understand them, the kind of challenge that has traditionally been confined to the realm of the arts, especially poetry, and which he tries to evoke with his ‘probes’ (small and often witty, whimsical or complex investigations into media ideas and phenomena).”

Lewis Lapham, in the introduction to the republished *Understanding Media* (MIT Press, 1995), wrote: “*Understanding Media* describes the world that I see and know on CBS News, at Disneyland, in the suburban malls, on the covers of the fashion magazines—a world in which human beings become commodities ...”

The Medium Is the Message

(mass-age)

It encloses us.

It processes us.

It transforms our way of thinking.

The Global Village

McLuhan thought of this idea in 1964.

Instantaneous communication such as the Internet wasn't available.

Even long-distance phoning wasn't as ubiquitous as it is now.

Andrew Ross, in "Candid Cameras," in *No Respect* (Routledge, 1989), wrote that we must situate McLuhan's ideas about the global village in the context of the growing post-WWII American power and influence in communications media: "McLuhanism ... is underscored by a benign vision of postnationalism, which sees the liberal moment of the nation-states as having been superseded by a new internationalist fraternity."

The Four Laws of the Media (or Media Tetrads)

McLuhan formulated these laws late in his career with his son Eric.

They were published posthumously.

He asks:

What does it extend? (extension)

What does it make obsolete? (obsolescence)

What does it retrieve? (retrieval)

What does it reverse into? (reversal)

How Was McLuhan Influenced by Innis?

McLuhan's historical overview of media (particularly in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*) owed much to Innis—including the notion of the bias on space and time. Whereas Innis saw media as affecting social organization and culture, McLuhan was more interested in sensory organization and thought—and, later, how electronic technology could alter people in psycho-physiological terms, and through our bodies.

How Has McLuhan Been Taken Up in Current Technological Debates?

Mark Kingwell wrote, in *The Ottawa Citizen* (November 9, 1997, p. E1):

Some people would have you believe that McLuhan was so prescient in understanding mass media, so forward-looking in seeing the possibilities of the Internet and "connectivity," that the world we now live in is practically one of his invention. A host of McLuhanite imitators, many Canadian, propagate the message of his genius in work after work of irritating incomprehensibility. These McClones, as I once called them, include people like B.W. Powe, Derrick de Kerchove, Arthur Kroker, and Eric McLuhan.... all of these people are dedicated to establishing their mentor in the pantheon of great 20th-century thinkers, a mastermind in the category of Einstein and Freud.

Marjorie Ferguson wrote, in “Marshall McLuhan Revisited: 1960s Zeitgeist Victim or Pioneer Postmodernist?” (*Media, Culture and Society* 13 [1991]: pp. 71–90):

McLuhan’s technological determinism and catch-phraseology are creeping back into the conversation. The “global village” resurfaced in the mediaspeak of politicians, television anchormen and newspaper editorials during the late 1980s, as the phenomenon of “globalization” was hyped and happening. The live television coverage of political dramas from Tiananmen Square to the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the packaging of CNN’s tenth anniversary “global vision” in 1990 offer recent examples ...

See also the McLuhan Program Culture & Technology’s “Who Is Marshall McLuhan?” page at <http://www.mcluhan.utoronto.ca/mm.html>; *On McLuhan: Forward through the Rearview Mirror*, edited by Paul Benedetti and Nancy DeHart (Prentice Hall Canada, 1996); and Paul Grosswiler’s *Method Is the Message: Rethinking McLuhan through Critical Theory* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1998).

Resources

- Babe, Robert E. (1990). *Telecommunications in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Babe, Robert E. (2000). *Canadian Communication Thought: Ten Foundational Writers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Rogers, Everett M. (1997). *A History of Communication Study: A Biographical Approach*. New York: The Free Press.