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Left Behind: End Times for a Media Technology Paradigm

Abstract

This chapter examines the work of the media “structuralists” of the so-called Canadian or Toronto school of media studies: Harold Adams Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter J. Ong, especially. Their work is placed within its historical context, both in terms of scholarly ancestry and in terms of its reception in North American universities and especially in schools of journalism. A critical assessment of the work of these scholars as media history is offered, recognizing its shortcomings as historical narrative but also its appeal as a way of understanding the influence of media forms.

Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Left Behind

End Times for a Media History Paradigm

Carolyn Marvin

ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the work of the media “structuralists” of the so-called Canadian or Toronto school of media studies: Harold Adams Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Walter J. Ong, especially. Their work is placed within its historical context, both in terms of scholarly ancestry and in terms of its reception in North American universities and especially in schools of journalism. A critical assessment of the work of these scholars as media history is offered, recognizing its shortcomings as historical narrative but also its appeal as a way of understanding the influence of media forms.

What makes us who we are? Class struggle? The disenchantment of the world? Do we owe our ways of being in the world to the family romance, the wheeling zodiac? How about the selfish gene, birth order, guns, germs and steel, patriarchy, the internal combustion engine, original sin, the scientific method? Is it the particular way that media technologies frame the social environment and organize our relationships to one another? Anyone inclined toward this last idea will recall a line of argument from the 1960s Marshall McLuhan for a while hijacked what might be called thinking popular culture with a high-concept take on the generational explosion of the 1960s – its energy, its music, its civil rights, its sexual openness, its advertising, its counter-culture, its antiwar volume.

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The ore McLuhan proposed to mine to uncover society's deep structure was television, rabbit ears cocked to the cultural sun and overdue for a vision more arresting and certainly more entertaining than the wasteland talk of establishment discourse. Behind television's ephemeral, culture-clucking content, McLuhan discerned a perceptual world in transition to sensuous plenitude. He argued that mental habits deformed and impoverished by the phonetic alphabet and typography were in an expansive process of reconnecting to an electric shared cornucopia of bodily sensation, especially the acoustic sense (McLuhan, 1964). While popularly admired as a possible master key to the cultural id or, at the very least, a provocative commentary on postwar society, the powerful message McLuhan assigned to the medium also had a scholarly life, primarily as the stalking horse for a paradigm I describe here as media structuralism. Though McLuhan was its public face, it was elaborated and developed by an interdisciplinary group of twentieth-century scholars collectively persuaded that the historical appearance of alphabetic inscription, especially its printed form, was a phase change in human civilization. Generally speaking, they agreed on the rough outlines of that change.

This essay is a critical examination, here and there a ferociously critical examination, of the intellectual usefulness of that paradigm for representing the history of media. Media structuralism took the history of inscription as a seed model for understanding the cultural impact of twentieth-century electronic media, especially television. Though inscription in all its forms was always implicated in the logic of media structuralism, alphabetic inscription in particular was examined as an instrument that, in rendering language abstract and detached from direct human encounter, had set human society down a historical path of no return.

The engine of the argument was the hoary old notion of technological determinism, a clumsy moniker for what turned out to be an equally clumsy claim. Everywhere the alphabet went, in this narrative, an irresistible logic of form went as well. Alphabetic literacy as a cultural formation was said to have restructured authority and trust, public and ceremonial life, the social and cultural organization of knowledge, forms of collective representation – even, in some versions, personality and perception. Its effect was not only on the forms of collective life, but the shape of the social values these forms were said to embody. For communication studies, media structuralism offered something else as well: an attractive apparatus of grand distinctions for fashioning a disciplinary imperative.

In media structuralism alphabetic inscription was ground zero for looking backwards at the past and forward to the future. It offered a way to frame a collection of troubling discontents associated with modernity, and experienced as anxiety about the attenuation of grounded spatial experience, the inscrutability of technocratic systems of knowledge and power, the incoherence of a diffuse public sphere of imagination, the felt loss of shared moral sensibilities, and an uneasiness that immediate objects and distant demands were too insistent and evolving too quickly for the world to be a comfortable human place. Media structuralists differed among themselves about the degree to which different inscriptive forms had moved this process

forward, and the exact processes by which literate effects were translated into the lived particulars of past and present existence. They agreed that whatever these transformative mechanisms were, they were both cumulative and accelerating. In pursuit of their convictions, these disagreements were more ignored than addressed, often in the expectation that deeper scholarship would sort them out in time. Meanwhile, visionaries could grasp the essential historical pattern.

The most influential twentieth-century structuralists did not work under the institutional aegis of communication, a postwar academic invention constructed from a patchwork of intellectual and practical interests traditionally divided between speech communication and journalism instruction. The postwar period saw the gradual assimilation by communications programs of questions about journalism and media addressed from the perspectives of social science. This was mass communication effects research, which soon began to assert itself as a powerful disciplinary paradigm. Recent work chronicles the origin of that tradition in the migration of World War II psychological warfare research and the networks of social scientists developed around it. The new approach was policy oriented, statistically savvy, and staffed by social scientists with the quantitative and organizational skills to secure funding and academic prestige. It entered a postwar educational landscape where major US universities competed for generous funding from a government that valued scientific expertise as an engine of measureable social progress (Haney, 2008).

The imparting of craft knowledge of journalism had no grounding in systematic research. It responded more to professional press associations than invisible colleges of scholars (Carey, 2000). From the beginning, the trainers of journalists and the social scientists did not fit very comfortably together. Though both were focused on media, the uneasiness of their coexistence has been noted, if not much explored. Meanwhile, communication and journalism programs were swept up in the postwar higher education project of constructing more rigorous academic standards across all disciplines, standardizing the curriculum and promoting their field in the wider public sphere. In the absence of long-standing theoretical or methodological traditions with which to leverage funding or prestige, mid-century journalism programs seemed unable to formulate a disciplinary image legible to the larger research university (Carey, 1978). The rhetoric they chose to defend themselves was proffered largely in civic and moral terms. Its message was that good journalists are key to producing an informed citizenry capable of shaping a wider public sphere. Journalism faculty with more academic ambitions positioned themselves as ethical arbiters, critics and moderators of a public debate among citizens, press, and government. Meanwhile, the mantra of journalism instruction – the impossibility of democracy without newspapers – was overshadowed by television in the popular imaginary, and in the imagination of students. With its unapologetic glitz, mid-century's most popular mass medium seemed to have little in common with the heroic world of journalistic ideals that were the heart of journalistic self-presentation in the academy.

At this moment of professional vulnerability, media structuralism offered some humanities-oriented communication and journalism scholars a distinctive set of

questions and a clear object of inquiry. The attribution of powerful inscriptive effects to whole cultures across the sweep of human history seemed to challenge the media effects tradition at its very own game. More subtly, media structuralism offered a moral framework. It laid out a broken world that legitimated disciplinary anxieties in the academic workplace by linking them to a more encompassing cultural narrative. In the academy's growing embrace of theoretical abstraction and scientific specialism, some communications and journalism faculty discerned an abandonment of that institution's vital responsibility to foster dialogue and debate about the great moral questions concerning the civic and academic realities that had come to pass in the postwar moment. It also explained why journalism faculty had not been welcomed as equal participants to the academic table. In these circles the narrative of literate deformation was received both as a well-timed commentary on political tensions within the academy, and as a place from which to reflect on the increasing takeover of the larger culture by the market and the state. Problematically, it failed to offer what its followers needed most. It did not provide a vision of institutional expertise, a methodologically coherent research strategy for training students, or a topical research agenda that could stabilize and consolidate the position of those communication scholars who were not part of the tradition of media effects.

McLuhan had none of this in mind when he laid out the mechanism of television as a perverse kind of modernism in which function followed form. Form was the pixelated screen. Function was the perceptual experience it assembled. McLuhan's pseudo-mathematical "ratio of the senses," a kind of updated medieval system of bodily humors, was meant to reveal a once seamlessly integrated human sensorium that had been fractured by alphabetic literacy and printing (McLuhan, 1962). What print had torn asunder, television would reconnect. The television screen was far more than an agent of shallowness and distraction. It presaged the repair of the psychic dissolution that had long burdened industrial man. This coming transformation was discernible in the new electronic technologies of knowledge and experience. A globally dispersed shared consciousness needed only to recognize itself to claim its utopian reward: unity instead of alienation, simultaneity instead of fragmentation.

Though the spectacle of an erudite literature professor ceding the future of culture to television, the medium of the commonplace and anti-intellectual, was thrilling, McLuhan's koan-like, aphoristic disdain for the conventional apparatus of scholarship denied him a serious academic hearing. A few weak efforts by supporters to translate his claims into something like identifiable social science hypotheses came to nothing. The culture moved on. Still, where technology had once seemed opaque and irrelevant, a side story to larger dramas of politics and society, McLuhan made it problematic, revelatory, and playful. His environmental conviction that everything in culture is a medium in disguise that lends itself to communicative theorizing hung on. He installed the idea that media do not end with their surfaces but resonate and connect with deeper cultural structures. Most of all, he succeeded in linking the profane order of technology to a powerful, even mystical, sense of cultural illumination. He remained an animating presence at the University of Toronto, which holds

his papers. His ideas were also significant in the work of the media ecology program at New York University originated by Neil Postman. Elsewhere his influence was manifest at the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign in the work of James W. Carey (1967, 1998), who paid less attention to McLuhan himself than to the claims of the media structuralists on whose ideas he had built.

The High Modernism of Alphabetic Literacy: Walter J. Ong

One of the driving premises of the cultural analysis of modern media is the idea that there is a relationship between forms of media and forms of life. This formulation had no disciplinary identity in US universities before McLuhan. While his ideas were synthesized from an eclectic mix of influences, the strand that is relevant here was his quixotic refashioning of work by a loosely connected group of anthropologists, linguists, classicists, and one political economist. Several of these scholars had published in the 1920s and 1930s. Most were contemporaries of McLuhan himself. Like him, several were at different times in residence at the University of Toronto. A fair number were Catholic. Though variably aware of one another's work in the 1960s and 1970s, they were less a self-identified research community than attached to a common object of inquiry, namely, the history-altering effects of alphabetic writing on human society. They embraced the view, contrarian for the time, that literate achievement was not an unqualified intellectual advance. A few believed that the price of alphabetic literacy had been a profound loss of cultural innocence. Working from various sources of evidence, they offered idiosyncratic and sometimes controversial readings of the historical record, and observations of isolated tribal and rural communities conceived as placeholders for earlier stages of civilizational development.

The work of Albert B. Lord and Milman Parry on the oral-formulaic techniques of Serbo-Croatian singers was foundational to their shared enterprise (Lord, 1960). Eric Havelock (1963, 1981) advanced a disputed thesis that the *Iliad* was the frozen snapshot of an apparatus of classical oral memory captured at the moment when the alphabet's unique power (the linguistic wisdom of the time) to transcribe spoken language had revolutionized intellectual storage. Jack Goody and Ian Watt at Cambridge energetically challenged the crude binary classification that divided men into savage or civilized, arguing that these categories misunderstood what forms of social organization were necessary to literate and non-literate societies (Goody & Watt, 1968; Goody, 1977).

On the basis of their own studies of inscriptive technologies and the social practices connected to them, two in this group made broad claims that the impact of alphabetic writing had large-scale diffuse effects that were discoverable, universal,

and profoundly problematic. They were Walter J. Ong, SJ, a onetime student of McLuhan's at St. Louis University, and Harold Adams Innis, McLuhan's older colleague at the University of Toronto. Ong discerned these effects in a somewhat manichean struggle between the ear and the eye for sensory dominance (Ong, 1967, 1979). For him the structure of consciousness flowed from repeated encounters with messages available to each perceptual sense. Though the historical ear captured human communication in the form it was meant to be, the historical eye was overwhelmed by corrupted messages that swamped the natural faculty of the ear. Innis argued that the physical properties of messages themselves, rather than the sensory modalities that captured them, were reflected in the mechanisms of societal stability and control. The struggle he discerned was between bureaucratic expansion fostered by messages that could move efficiently across space without distortion, and spiritual traditions of memory in which messages could persist across time with little distortion (Innis, 1991, 2007; for a useful retrospective consideration of Innis's work, see Acland & Buxton, 1999).

For both Ong and Innis, what appeared to be an analysis of the empirical conditions of communication became an unprovable claim that a fundamental moral tendency was associated with different technological forms. Each employed a wholly modernist impulse to strip down human experience to what he perceived as its essential properties. Each also embraced a surprisingly anachronistic framing device: the old culture-stage theory of civilizations, even then a discredited tradition for asserting radical and universalized shifts in human affairs over time. The arguments of both theorists shared three anchoring postulates: (1) At any given historical moment, a "dominant" medium controls the moral, intellectual, and social character of the society in which it exists. (2) The origin of a proper kind of human morality lies in acoustic speech. So does the possibility of its renewal. (3) Acoustic speech is weak against alphabetic writing (and its handmaiden, electronic media).

That writing dominates speech was so obvious to Ong as to need no serious demonstration of its validity as a fact. He repeatedly argued that the habits of acoustic speech were no match for the sheer plenitude and irresistible power of written language. On the plenitude side, writing was said simply to have crowded out meaningful speech and taken up social real estate previously occupied by talk. He might have sought to establish clinching, systematic evidence in the experience of contemporary man – the most accessible and presumably unambiguous example of this historical dynamic at work. In fact, this would not have been easy evidence to assemble. Would one compare time occupied with written media to time spent in conversation? Would a better measure be the number of words individually channeled through each medium, whatever the time spent? Should one consider the social importance of messages in each mode? How to make sense of striking differences in literate and conversational practices across social groups? Which groups? Might individual measures be the wrong ones? Should the focus be on institutional communication? Which institutions? Above all, how could one disentangle the lived reality that writing is thoroughly intertwined with talk, and always has been? To

draw only the most obvious conclusion, people engage in more talk because they read and write, and read and write more because they talk.

Alternatively, Ong argued that the brute psychological power of written language colonizes and transforms the fragile spirit of spoken language, whatever its plenitude might be. This is the idea, approximately, that speech in societies dominated by writing isn't the true, natural speech of original face-to-face encounter. Ong offers many anecdotal examples. They include dictionary-referenced educated speech that in time renders socially inferior the dialect of the neighborhood. The emblematic modern oral speaker is a broadcaster or politician who works from a script. Novelistic dialogue is an artificial facsimile of natural speech. The inevitable logic of his argument is to reduce all contemporary spoken language to a degraded simulation of authentic conversation. Even speech learned at a literate mother's knee cannot be orally pristine when spoken language is demoted to a pale echo of writing. Ong skirts the implication of his argument and also does not refute it.

The justificatory theology of Ong's framework sheds some light on its structure. In *The Presence of the Word* (1967) he argues that men at the origin of human history communicated freely with God. This archetypal encounter created a foundational model for men's relationships to one another. The spiritual necessity of voice and presence was, teleologically speaking, the final cause of the evolution of speech. Writing imposed a disabling artificiality on what men were evolutionarily destined to be. The Fall was effectively a historical event in which inscription shattered the world and estranged men from God. Language that naturally exists in a dialogical condition of acoustical fullness was abstracted and placed on the page. It became a lifeless object separable from the human beings who generated and perceived it. Thus was set in motion a cascade of ever more inventive ways for men to separate themselves from one another while concealing from themselves what they had done. In Ong's view the inscriptive abstraction that fractured the core of human encounter still lies at the beating heart of media, insidiously working against the healing and communion of loving mutuality that a broken world requires. If the spatial abstraction of language by alphabetic inscription so irrevocably split apart something in human consciousness, exactly when did it take hold? Ong never names the decisive moment of psychological transformation after which men became hobbled in their understanding of their essential humanity. Here we pause for emphasis. If the psychological shift away from the wholeness of experience cannot be anchored with historical specificity, if such a moment cannot be unambiguously located for any particular group of people, perhaps the psychological consequences of literacy are neither definitive nor universal but utterly ambiguous, various, and contradictory for all human persons, individually and collectively – much like all human experience.

Ong's most thorough attempt to demonstrate empirically how alphabetic literacy has shaped the structure of human knowledge appears in *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (1983). Based on his doctoral dissertation, it is a study of a pedagogical method invented and popularized by the sixteenth-century French rhetorician and educational reformer, Peter Ramus. Ong explores the Ramist strategy of

visualizing knowledge as a discrete object in space to be efficiently compartmentalized, dissected, juxtaposed, and compared to similar discrete objects. This simplification and flattening out of the learned tradition repudiates a person-centered epistemology of rhetorically layered and sifted judgment. Ong finds evidence in Ramism of an underlying psychological shift away from the traditional acoustic sensibility of the rhetorical art with its appreciation of the dramatic, the creative, and the poetic, and toward the cultivation of new mental habits associated with the monologic, the diagrammatic, and the quantifiable. Ong also argues that the visual cast of the Ramian prose style reflects the psychological experience of a learned man of his day. In this Ong may have been a victim of the fallacy he attributes to literate man. He is perhaps too ready to take what is on the page for a complete reality.

It wasn't just the moral force of language that was weakened by alphabetic literacy in Ong's view. He argued that the triumph of the visual over the acoustic affects human perception of even the phenomenal world. He contrasts the imagined psychological integrity of pre-literate aural experience with the fragmented perception of the post-literate world. He frames this distinction with a physiological proof. In his acoustic cosmology, sound bathed pre-literate hearers non-directionally. Men felt themselves to be immersed in the womb of the world (Ong, 1979). This is a peculiar basis on which to claim distinctions in historical states of human experience. It is hard to believe that any living person exists in a world that is not phenomenologically perceived as immersive. An acute perception of aural directionality is also a vital mode of perceptual discrimination at least some of the time for everyone, and not only for modern navigators of urban streets. Skilled hunter-gatherers would have depended heavily on it. The point of Ong's contrast is to argue that visual experience puts viewers at a perceptual and, therefore, psychological distance from what they behold. This claim must puzzle anyone who has ever been lost in the face of the beloved, or utterly absorbed in a stunningly beautiful landscape, a traumatic scene, a good book.

Pre-literate hearing man was seeing man as well. Some fancy footwork is necessary, then, to explain away the obvious delight in visual experience we may attribute to the creators of the skilled and beautiful designs of material artifacts left to us from ancient and traditional cultures. Acute vision must always have been critical both to the survival and the aesthetic pleasures of the human species. Though different perceptual skills may be honed for the needs of different historical times and places, there are no grounds to believe that hearing was the premier perceptual sense of people in settlements without writing (or that it makes any sense to compare the modalities of ear and eye hierarchically). It is obvious that the visual objects men attend to vary by time and place, but Ong's claim that the most typical visual experience of literate worlds is inscriptive is difficult to credit.

If alphabetic literacy dominates modern visual experience, and modern visual experience dominates all other sensory modalities, then it must dominate touch itself, which accompanies our ever-present situatedness in the world. Ong contrasts what he believes is the relatively more impoverished visual experience of alphabetic

cultures with the presumed perceptual richness of pre-literate existence. Did he mean there is less visual variety in modern life, or that we ignore extant visual variety in order to read? Did he find cities to be less visually variegated than natural landscapes? Here the point at issue cannot be writing as such. It is a claim about the poverty of even the most elaborate human artifactual creations stacked up against nature's fecundity. If human worlds are full to the brim with visual experience in all historical conditions, what can it mean for the ratio of the senses to shift historically? For the perceptual "load" to be different from one culture to another? What is the proper ratio of sensory experience for human beings? What best suits the forest? The savannah? The tundra?

And yet Ong also allows that writing has been necessary to the full development of human consciousness. This concession seems to give the game away. If evolutionary orality may flourish only at the cost of intellectual development, it can hardly be a totalizing ideal for communication among men living in time. In light of this admission, Ong (1982) undertakes to reframe his analytical goal as simply laying out the affordances and tendencies of the range of available communicative modes. Just as there is a natural balance of the senses, he proposes the possibility of a cultural balance between writing and speech. It is hard to imagine what this might be, given his previous arguments. It is curious that while writing has been able to historically amplify and elaborate its power, speech has lacked this capacity. It is more threatened than ever by what he labels the secondary orality of electronic media with its deceptive illusion of intimacy and dependence on literate technology to exist at all. Since speech remains impotent, literate psychology remains unredeemed.

Particularly problematic is Ong's claim that some groups living among literates in the twentieth century have maintained living contact with pristine orality. To explain the persistent failure of minority students in the United States to achieve parity in educational achievement with their majority-group peers, Ong (1979) invokes the "highly oral culture of our black urban ghettos" (p. 4). He diagnoses an educational disparity as a clash of "residual" orality with the literate world of schooling. More than a century after the end of the slave trade, he seems to propose that African Americans are psychologically wedded to the tribal orality of their ancestors, impervious to the contemporary literate blanket surrounding them. Leaving aside the faulty assumption of a unified "African" oral tradition, and the failure to account for this striking survival of this oral sensibility in spite of the disappearance of so many other features of a pre-literate African heritage, the underlying point is worth our notice. There are pockets of escape from literacy after all. "Nor is orality ever completely eradicable; reading a text oralizes it" (Ong, 1982). If print is oralizable, what possible grounds are left for driving a psychological wedge between writing and speech?

Indeed, Ong never seriously addressed how the orally pristine might sustain themselves, or how contemporary communities might develop their own oral traditions in a larger typographic milieu. The point allows us to consider how literacy itself is diffused. Must literate skill be individually acquired to work its

consciousness-transforming effects? Is living in a world of literate conventions – time stamps and train schedules, driver’s licenses, tax forms and street signs – enough to inculcate a so-called literate psychology? Is literate-mindedness, whatever this may be, wholly transmitted by social imitation and not at all by the visual abstractions of language and sensory specialization? Does the achievement of cultural literate-mindedness require the attainment of reading and writing skills by some critical mass of the population? Do adults with poor literacy skills really have habits of thinking that differ fundamentally from those of their literate fellows? Or do they lack access to specific social networks and timely information?

The End of the Great Divide

To summarize: The text of Ongian structuralism is a mechanism that evacuates from spoken language an acoustically conveyed morality that is the essence of spoken language. This loss of dialogic mutuality estranges literates from the phenomenal world and other men. We may think of this brief statement as the kernel of the tragic narrative of the so-called Great Divide hypothesis. Once prevalent in educational and cognitive psychology circles, the Great Divide proposes in its most basic form that literacy is the signal cognitive acquisition that makes higher-order abstract thought possible. In addition to the tragic vision of media structuralism, there is an ameliorative version of the Great Divide as well. Literacy acquisition is the condition of sophisticated technological progress, and the essential tool of an informed democracy.

To assess the root claim of the claim that literacy is an essential prerequisite for abstract thought, the social psychologists Sylvia Scribner and David Cole (1981) undertook a seven-year ethnographic and experimental study of literates and non-literates in a small area of Liberia in the 1970s. They chose their field site for the fortuitous fact that three different scripts were locally taught using distinctive pedagogies. Arabic script was the medium of instruction in Qur’anic schools. Romanized script was taught in English schools. A locally invented Vai script was taught informally by some adults to other adults. Most students typically learned only one kind of script. This meant that Scribner and Cole were able to measure and compare the cognitive skills of each group of script literates. They also measured the cognitive skills of literates and non-literates across a range of cognitive domains. These included abstract thinking, taxonomic categorization, memory, logical reasoning, and reflective knowledge about language. These data were supplemented by ethnographic observation and extended surveys of family and occupational histories, and of attitudes associated with modernity. Unglamorously but importantly, they learned that different styles of literate instruction cultivate different cognitive skills. The tasks that students excelled at were exactly the cognitive tasks they were trained for. These cognitive tasks were related to the practical functions each kind of script performed

in Vai society. There was also no Great Divide. That is, there were no statistically significant differences in the capacities of literates and non-literates to succeed at abstract thinking tasks. The belief that oral man is captured within a shell of concreteness he cannot peck his way out of to some higher-order level of thinking was heartily disproved.

There was one weak effect that is richly ironic in this context. Literates were a little better than non-literates at *talking* about the structure of language and literacy. In addition, schooled English literacy affected some social relationships among its practitioners, in ways that schooled Qur'anic and non-schooled Vai literacy did not, by offering access to bodies of knowledge outside those locally circulated. This was so even though the amount of time all groups had spent in urban areas was not significantly different. Since girls did not attend school, gender was the single attribute, decidedly a non-cognitive one, reliably associated with the possession of literate skill. The point was that the sources of intellectual achievement are found in cultural and social circumstances, and not in cognitive capacities transformatively tied to literacy acquisition. So where are we? If it is the case that shifts in communication technology do not kick new psychological processes into gear through a process of inculcating literate-mindedness, perhaps these technologies steer social processes in powerful ways. This was the argument Harold A. Innis developed, and to whose work we now turn.

Media Structuralism in its Laocoön (Mannerist) Phase: Innis

Commenting on Innis's account of communication technology as a shaping force in human history for a special issue of the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, his biographer A. John Watson (1977) points to an iconicized, technologically determinist Innis (pp. 45–46). This was the Innis whose bold theoretical claims about societal character anchored in the physical properties of message decay made him a key figure within a certain strain of media studies. This media structuralist Innis is often contrasted with a second persona. This was the political economist whose scholarship about the Canadian fur trade and cod fisheries produced a much admired theory of economic relations between metropole and hinterland. The iconicized, structuralist Innis had a more sweeping point of view. He laid out a world-scale drama of technological contenders in a continuing confrontation between the spiritual tenacity of inward-looking religious tradition and the present-mindedness of secular expansion across territory. He pitted the comparatively effortless movement of messages across distance by media like paper, papyrus, and radio against less mobile forms like parchment, stone, and oral tradition. He believed their durability made them rich in their power to conserve memory. (A small point: Parchment is sturdier than paper, but not much heavier to move. Nomadic oral cultures traveling across space were hardly

unusual. Countless pre-literate groups that stayed put proved rather more fragile than Innis's schema suggests.)

It would be reassuring to conclude that the formulized Innis sketched above was a caricature of the real thing, but it is hard to do with much conviction. *Empire and Communications* (2007) and *The Bias of Communication* (1991) together present the basic framework. In them, Innis wraps up Western history and a little more in less than 300 pages. *Empire* starts with early writing and proceeds through Egypt, Greece, Rome, medieval Europe, Islam, and the printing press. *Bias* repeats parts of that narrative and lays out nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglophone publishing with a glancing take on radio and telegraphy. In so compressed an itinerary, even Innis's most sympathetic readers have little to fall back on but the highly abstract engine of space-time oscillation in which "biases" toward present-mindedness or tradition-mindedness swing back and forth in history. These arise from the physical portability or durability of whatever media instantiate and so "dominate" a given society's prevailing systems of knowledge and authority. Sooner or later a challenger with the contrary bias rises up and displaces its dominant predecessor in processes that Innis never deeply details. He created no conceptual architecture at all to mediate between his abstract matrix and the slightly mad chronicle of unsorted facts he offered to shore it up. A series of breathless historical assertions and propositions unrolls in the texts of *Empire* and *Bias*, their connecting inferences frequently incomplete or elided. Their author disposes of vast time scales in a few sentences. Great clumps of political and historical complexity are rendered in abbreviated narratives with little discussion. He is contradictory. His inattention to underlying social processes makes it difficult to follow, much less evaluate, his conclusions. In the absence of a conceptual language to order his staccato breviary of fact, his claims are at once too abstract and too particular. His work offers none of the rich expansiveness of articulation that is fundamental to historical explanation. This is probably why both books were scarcely reviewed in economic and history journals at publication and received only a handful of notices in political economy journals, even in Canada where Innis remains an intellectual national hero.

The opacity of Innis's prose is legendary. It is hard to pick an excerpt that illustrates this in a short space; the following sample may suffice. It references the United States during the Great Depression, a topic that most readers will find more familiar than the ancient civilizations that mostly occupied his concern. Its relative abundance of detail is atypical since Innis was wont to summarize the character of whole societies in a phrase. Of the 1930s United States he writes:

The highly sensitive economy built up in relation to newsprint and its monopoly position in relation to advertising hastened an emphasis on a new medium, notably the radio, which in turn contributed to a large-scale depression. The radio was accompanied by political change in the return of the Democratic party to power and the election of F. D. Roosevelt who claimed that "nothing would help him more than to have the newspapers against him." Localization of metropolitan newspapers in the United States

was accompanied by weeklies and digests which provided a common denominator from a national rather than a metropolitan point of view. Illustrated papers and the radio responded to the demands of advertising for national coverage. The radio emphasized a lowest common denominator with profound effects on music. The significance of mechanization in print, photographs including the cinema, phonographs including the talkies, and radio has been evident in literature, art, and music. The pressure of mechanization on words has been reflected in simplified spelling and an interest in semantics. The limitations of words have led to resort to architecture and the rise of skyscrapers as an advertising medium. In North America, in contrast with Great Britain and Europe, the book was subordinated to the newspaper. Mechanization involved an emphasis on best-sellers and the creation of a gap of unintelligibility of more artistic literary works. . . . If civilization may be measured by the tolerance of unintelligibility, its capacities are weakened by monopolies of knowledge built up in the same political area using the same language. (Innis, 2007, pp. 162–163)

For this paragraph (from which several sentences addressing the history of publication are removed) Innis cites the following anecdotal sources: H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1936); Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932); L. L. Schucking, *The Sociology of Literary Taste* (London: K. Paul, Trench, 1944); D. L. Cohn, *The Good Old Days* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940); E. Haldeman Julius, *The First Hundred Million* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1928).

Without clearly committing himself, Innis suggests that the collapse of newspaper advertising was a serious factor in the Great Depression. He makes no effort to compare it to more significant collapses in farm commodity prices, automobile sales, steel purchases, or housing. Did newspapers really elect FDR, his well-known quip notwithstanding, or did voters respond to the brutal immediacy of their circumstances? Reliable estimates of how many advertising dollars would have gone to newspapers in the absence of radio are notoriously difficult to establish. He fails to elaborate on what it means if radio content was driven by national advertising, or what content this was. He attributes a “national” point of view to media and their audiences without supporting detail while gesturing vaguely in the direction of its significance. The “profound” effects of radio on music remain unstated. Architecture as advertising invites questions about whether steel and concrete, like stone, count as time-biased media relative to “words.”

Cultural decline seems a less helpful explanation for why US newspaper readers outnumbered book readers than the cheaper price of newspapers and the modest literacy skills of an expanding immigrant population. What we should conclude about a rising rate of newspaper consumption (at a time when rates of mass market book sales were also increasing, if not so spectacularly), he doesn’t say. We are forced to guess what he means (probably nothing good) by claiming the books were “subordinated” to newspapers. Does the popularity of bestsellers really explain resistance to “more artistic literary works?” His final sentence seems to attribute intellectual and cultural openness to multilingual societies, though we cannot be sure. The troubling

proposition that “civilization” is weakened by monolingualism follows from a premise barely elaborated. Nor does he pick up and expand on this comment elsewhere in the chapter in which it appears. The point is not to throw stones at Innis’s style so much as to demonstrate his pattern of leaving key assertions and arguments undeveloped in relation both to specific historical information and whatever larger cultural conclusions he hoped to draw.

We should be troubled by his methodological rigor. Innis never tells us how it is that whole cultures can be properly described as having a single “bias.” Did he work backward from independently observed attributes in each society of interest to discover that its major (by what criterion?) media were those with exactly the biases associated with those attributes? On what grounds did he dismiss (or examine) the relative effects of other-biased media existing in the same time-space? Is his definition of media inclusive enough? His argument is disappointingly circular. He asserts that the materiality of durability and portability in selected media may be understood as proof of societal dispositions toward conservation or expansion.

What if, over time, previously durable and portable media acquire capacities they may not have had before? In her history of the impact of printing, Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979) argues that paper and printing together created new and powerful cultural memory. What we call the quattrocento Renaissance, she says, was a cultural flowering we know about mostly because it was preserved on printed paper. Previously, the memory of cultural achievements had been relatively more ephemeral, subject to decimation and erasure by epidemics, wars, and other disasters. Their successors struggled to recover, or were unaware of, the ground that had been lost. Printing reversed this process. Duplication in large quantities made unprecedented levels of written content effectively permanent even in the face of social catastrophe. Earlier content had no comparable hope of survival. Parchment, though sturdier, could not be produced in quantity. This made it altogether more fragile and less time-binding than printed paper, Innis’s argument to the contrary notwithstanding. Printed paper was both a premier medium for extending messages in space, and the default medium for modern memory as well.

Digital communication, our contemporary medium of transmission *par excellence*, has a similarly impressive history of elaborating and transforming its spatial bias. We know its earliest electrical forms as telegraphy, telephony, and radio, all memory-less modes by Innis’s lights. Over a century and a half these have morphed into a startling profusion of capacities and forms. Its development of unprecedentedly expanded reservoirs of memory poses challenges as dramatic and destabilizing, and opportunities as remarkable, as those from rapidly expanding multi-channel transmission across space. The conceptual point is that the applications, affordances, and obstacles posed by media are unpredictable and never fixed, even in their earliest manifestations. Their engagement with the cultures that produce them is never rigidly fixed.

Can we really believe that time-biased societies usually have no driving interest in present goings-on, the very definition of spatial bias? How do we know that the authority structures of so-called memory-minded societies are actually decentral-

ized? Among societies with little history of territorial expansion, we may be reluctant to concur that this has more to do with the nature of their media systems than with a lack of technological or economic capacity for aggressiveness; or, conversely, to a fortunate command of natural and economic resources satisfying to a domestic population, or, further, to political calculations and arrangements that make aggression unthinkable and costly. To soften the rigidity of his time-space matrix, Innis offers a compromise position for anomalies that are too obvious to ignore. Empire and political stability are said to be markers of a balance (the criterion is unclear) between time-binding and space-binding media in some societies. (On other occasions the term "empire" refers to a civilization-destroying, unrestrained spatial bias working its will.) There is a whiff in this confusion of a self-referential logic entangled in its own concepts and unmanageably arbitrary in its application to historical details.

Though technology has often been conceived as an instrument for progressively rendering space ever weaker in its ability to influence communicative exchange, the cosmology of media structuralism invested space with an aggressive and sinister vitality. In the abstract, compressed space of the page, Ong saw depersonalization and the shattering of human relations. In the leap of messages across distance, Innis saw bureaucratic centralism, the implementation of force, and the crushing of tradition. If space is a villain and memory a virtue, and the history of the West is mostly an obsession with space and a disrespect for time, as Innis argues, there is a paradox in his prescription for the West to pay attention to its past. What past would he recuperate? Surely nostalgia must be reckoned a vice as great as distance in the media structuralist cosmos. That human flourishing is often choked by tradition is plain, just as there are liberating, even ennobling possibilities in hopping across territory. The equation of spatiality with the tyranny of imperialism is no more defensible than the equation of temporality with the tyranny of revelation. Structurally speaking, remote, non-accountable control of distant territory is no more obviously inhumane than the sedimented brutality of racism or the oppression of women, forms of cultivated memory both.

Give Innis credit. He had a global sense of human history and a deep intuition of the perils of spreading technocratic systems. He saw that entities on the scale of nations and civilizations are complex assemblages of material and expressive elements, though this Deleuzian mode of analysis was not available to him for conceptualizing large, interactive agglomerations coalescing and dissolving across space, and producing, in time, other entities altogether. No genuinely emergent properties unfold in the just-so stories that constitute Innis's narrative. There is only the hydraulic opposition of tradition to the tireless advance of the market and industrialism, the whole too abstract to capture the deeper complexities of social change. One imagines Innis stacking fact upon alleged fact pulled from a patchwork of secondary sources of varying quality in a great Baconian pile of statements from which, added up, the truth of societal change would somehow emerge.

Though he positioned historical change as at the level of society and not psyche, Innis was very much in synch with the psychological structuralists. His monopolies

of knowledge and their associated biases run parallel to notions about literate dominance. He, too, invests dialogue with singular virtue. He, too, sees history as a narrative of the advancing spatialization of language and thought. He looks back nostalgically on human societies centuries removed (Athens and Byzantium for him; pre-literate humanity for Ong) and proclaims their lifeworlds to have been morally balanced. Of the complex morphologies of war and peace and politics, of natural resources and social classes, of countless other factors critical for assessing the “implications of the media of communication for the character of knowledge,” he had too little to say (Innis, 1991, p. 3).

What was his aim? In *Bias* he called for the revival of “effective vital discussion” and a recognition “on the part of the universities that teachers and students are still living and human” (1991, p. 32). He believed that universities with their ancient traditions of dialogue and philosophical inquiry had become extensions of the market and the state. He hoped to explain the long tale of history that had brought the West to such a state by exploring how its forms of media reflected its forms of life. This was a visionary question in the 1950s, unacknowledged in conventional historiography. The ambition of his undertaking and the inadequacy of the conceptual tools he invented should be viewed against that background. Still, we can fairly ask how his efforts to render the instrumentalities of thought visible as objects for investigation and concern stacked up against the received historical explanations he hoped to show were radically incomplete. Did he transform any established narratives or points of view? In fact, he took on no traditional periodizations, disputed no mid-range historical theories, clarified no ambiguous historical facts. He resolved no existing historical debates. At best, he mounted a parallel narrative that, lacking in significant historical depth, failed to demonstrate the essential connection, if it was there, between the intellectual and political cultures of the societies that interested him and their forms of media.

Still, he anticipated what is today a thoroughly self-conscious preoccupation of social theory. This is the problem of how to construct theoretical models able to describe the shifting and overlapping relationships of the global and the local manifest in large, technological systems running through the resilient complexity and creativity of realized life. That his schema should have failed is not surprising. Both the scale of the attempt and the lack of available data for exploring the questions that interested him made a genuinely illuminating account of how media are embedded in the shape of the world impossible to produce.

One thinks of remarkable examples of recent historical work he would have loved that are far closer to the spirit of his inquiry than his fatally simplified space-time matrix. Among them is Michael Clanchy’s (1979) discussion of the adoption of writing by the court administrators of Norman England from the eleventh century forward, their uncertain groping toward bureaucratic record keeping and retrieval, the clash with orally based proofs of real property, and the struggle of new literate conventions of law with older legal forms of social trust. Or Carlo Ginzburg’s (1980) study of a stubborn sixteenth-century French miller who confounded local authori-

ties by making cunning use of his new literate skills and limited formal knowledge. Or Gerald Strauss's (1978) account of an ill-fated experiment by sixteenth-century Lutheran reformers to indoctrinate the young in the catechism and other religious texts with an extensive regimen of oral and literate protocols and an elaborate system of evaluation that showed them the failure of their efforts. Or James C. Scott's (1998) account of how in nineteenth-century Germany the axe and the surveying text were welded into a powerful system to transform the forest into a machine for producing tax revenue, which collapsed from this catastrophic simplification of its ecosystem a century later. More recently, he would have been interested in the debate between Elizabeth Eisenstein and Adrian Johns on whether printing had a determinative role in the early modern rise of science, or whether it was only a palimpsest on which cultural habits and constructions were played out (Eisenstein, 2002a, 2002b; Johns, 1998, 2002).

Innis's grand narrative of communication history did not turn out to be of great interest to subsequent generations of historians or political economists. This reflected its shortcomings as well as a more general retreat from grand theory in the social sciences and humanities, the rise of a more fine-grained interpretive turn, and new fashions of conceptualizing power. Some of the most fruitful recent work in social theory has pursued what is now called the spatial turn as the old grand theories have morphed into new paradigms: network theory, globalization theory, assemblage theory. These worry about connectivity and messiness in space, not its determinist depersonalized footprint.

What was the Structuralist Appeal?

Where Innis's historical narrative of communication technology did have purchase was in the field of communication studies, though he may have been more often invoked than closely read. The most persuasive incarnation of his space-time schema is arguably James W. Carey's well-known essay "A Cultural Approach to Communication" (1975). As generations of students know, it contrasts a "ritual view" of communication concerned with the maintenance of society in time with a "transmission view" associated with the extension of knowledge and control across territory. Innis's spirit shows up in other work as well. It includes Josh Meyrowitz's *No Sense of Place* (1985), on how media foster a contemporary sense of rootlessness, and Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), a cautionary tale about the baneful influence of television.

In the 1980s a flood of new work by historians on early modern Europe began to examine that era's multiple cultures of literate and oral practices in rich detail and with considerable conceptual inventiveness and complexity. Never favored in professional historical circles, media structuralism found itself thoroughly eclipsed. We now return to a consideration of why communication scholars dreamed of locating

its lasting development within the field of media studies. That significant hopes were invested in it as a paradigmatic alternative to research on media effects can be seen in James W. Carey's (1992) estimation of the work of Harold Innis as the "great achievement of communications on this continent" that had "rescued communications from a branch of social psychology and freed it from a reliance on natural science models" (p. 142). This hopeful prediction was offered as an imagined corrective to the field's relentless present-mindedness. If McLuhan had made the cultural framing of media effects thinkable, he had offered no useable mode of analysis. Still, he drew attention to a body of work that did seem to offer a suitably weighty, ready-made historical foundation hatched in academically reliable ways whose authors urged its relevance to the unfolding media moment.

Evidence for the claims of media structuralism was drawn from societies that existed long before the nineteenth century in places other than North America, and from scattered field investigations. Such work had no precedent and could have no future in communications programs. Lacking specialist training in both the relevant historical background and primary source materials that constituted the evidential bedrock of media structuralism, communication scholars found themselves in no position to substantively refine, amplify, or critically review its claims – that is, to conduct the hard intellectual work that keeps scholarly knowledge vital and productive. This did not stop them from using it to authorize their own perspectives on the state of contemporary media and society. As it turned out, the one-variable, two-variable logic of media structuralism was not so different at its core from the effects tradition from which it claimed to depart. It may have felt familiar to its followers, immersed in the intellectual atmosphere and logic of media effect. Nor can the wielding of a shiny intellectual instrument, suggestive without being wholly clear, bolstered by erudite reference, be altogether discounted. What were taken to be the canonic texts of media structuralism were gathered into a useable past, an argument from authority.

Media structuralism answered to a deeply felt disciplinary imperative to construct a qualitative, non-experimental account of the power of media to shape not attitudes and perceptions, but whole cultures, even eras. In the context of communication studies, its root metaphor was especially apt. Technology as the privileged conceptual form of media favored in this approach seemed as solid as Dr. Johnson's table. The link from technology to moral and social meaning may have seemed equally unambiguous. Even the categories by which communications programs divided themselves up – speech, press, radio, television – authorized its aura of empirical substantiality as an antidote to the squishy impressionism of qualitative studies in the competitive politics of academic life.

Beyond their hopes of establishing a paradigm that might usefully serve a new vision of the field of communication, the followers of media structuralism aimed to enrich the intellectual resources of that field, and broaden, in the best liberal arts tradition, the range of important questions it could weigh in on. Its contributions might have been more lasting if those to whom media structuralism appealed with

the greatest force had been more thoughtful, even in the absence of specialist knowledge, about its animating premises, both its clumsy and rigid notion of media dominance and its mystified phenomenology of sensory experience. These and other premises went virtually uncriticized. Media structuralism inhabited a moment when a strategic search for disciplinary identity was resolved by substituting a deeply felt moral agenda for the work of scholarly investigation that could have made that agenda a better fit and allowed it to speak more usefully to a larger scholarly and public audience. It did stretch the imagination of the field, introduced new and searching questions about how to think about the role of communication in contemporary society, and laid sympathetic ground for the time when what is now broadly called cultural studies was able to more successfully broaden the field beyond the quantitative project of media studies. In retrospect, it stands as the unclaimed freight of communication theory, now a musty box of curiosities, witness to a lost way of looking at the world.

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