The Bias Against Communication:
On the Neglect and Non-publication of the
“Incomplete and Unrevised Manuscript” of
Harold Adams Innis

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Abstract: Harold Adams Innis’ “A History of Communications” has attained almost mythological status within his oeuvres, and is widely recognized as an important repository of his ideas. Yet the work (numbering some 2,400 pages) has never been published, and its significance for understanding Innis’ scholarship has yet to be assessed. This paper examines why a number of efforts to publish the work met with failure, giving particular attention to a venture supported by the CRTC in 1969-70, as viewed through the eyes of Mary Quayle Innis and those advising her (particularly Northrup Frye, Donald Innis, and George Ferguson). The paper concludes with an overview of the manuscript’s contents, along with some of the organizing principles that underpinned the empirical material that Innis presents. Such an exercise, I argue, is essential if one is to address whether the document merits publication in some form.

Résumé: L’ouvrage «A History of Communications», de Harold Adams Innis, s’est fait une réputation quasi mythique parmi l’ensemble de son œuvre; on le reconnaît généralement comme un répertoire important des idées de l’auteur. Pourtant, le manuscrit de quelque 2 400 pages demeure inédit; sa pertinence quant à la contribution intellectuelle du chercheur canadien reste à évaluer. Cet article examine les raisons de l’échec d’une série de tentatives de publication de l’ouvrage, particulièrement d’une démarche appuyée par le CRTC en 1969 et 1970, à partir de la perspective de Mary Quayle Innis et de ses conseillers (particulièrement Northrup Frye, Donald Innis et George Ferguson). En guise de conclusion, l’article présente un survol du contenu du texte, de même que les principes directeurs sous-jacents à la présentation des matériaux empiriques dans l’ouvrage. Je soutiens qu’une telle réflexion s’avère essentielle afin de déterminer si le manuscrit mérite d’être publié sous une forme ou une autre.

Like the myths that Harold Adams Innis was fond of invoking, his own Herculean
A History of Communications has come to attain almost mythological status
within his oeuvres. Yet while many commentators ritualistically pay homage to it

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as the mystical source of Innis’ ideas, few have sought to understand it, or dare I say, have even made the effort to read it. Deterred perhaps by the legends about its gargantuan size, its labyrinthine impenetrability, and its ferocity to the fragile attention spans of unsuspecting readers, guides to Innis’ work have largely been content to navigate the safer and more accessible waters of his published writings.

Myths and mythmakers
In what follows, I hope to shed some light on the origins of the myths about the manuscript that have circulated. This will involve an analysis of the circumstances and decision-making for its non-publication. More generally, my intention is to shed light on the issue of how it is that the vast bulk of the material placed in archives largely remains undisturbed and unexamined, thereby having little impact either upon scholarly life or upon public debates. Arguably, due to the pressures of time and resources, researchers tend to gravitate towards items in archives that can be quickly scrutinized and photocopied at a reasonable cost, such as correspondence, memoranda, and reports. In effect, they comb through relatively small-scale materials, extracting bits of information and recombining them into larger works. Few have had the time or the inclination to wade through the document, given its scale and the fact that it appears to largely consist of factual material; reading it in its entirety demands a considerable investment in time and effort. These factors also shed some light on why this manuscript is not readily publishable. As a forbiddingly “lumpy” document (to invoke an idiom of the economists) that is in urgent need of revision and compression, the History of Communications document does not readily fit within the conventional spatial boundaries for the publishing of texts. Hence, like numerous other massive manuscripts in various states of completion scattered throughout the world’s archives, it has yet to be made readily available to a reading public.

These issues notwithstanding, the lack of attention given to the document is a scandalous state of affairs and a sad commentary on the state of Canadian scholarly life. Imagine, if you will, that Karl Marx or Max Weber had produced a 2,400-page manuscript in the last years of his life on political economy or comparative economic history. Isn’t it entirely inconceivable that such a work would not appear in any sort of readable form, that it would be virtually unread, and that little commentary would appear on it? Moreover, unlike dominant intellectual figures elsewhere, little effort has been made to assemble the published and unpublished writings of Canadian thinkers into an accessible form.

The lack of attention given to the History of Communications manuscript is symptomatic of the weak development of Canadian intellectual history. Not only are there abysmally few archivally based biographies of Canadian intellectual figures, but more general historical accounts of the main currents of Canadian intellectual life are noticeably lacking. Consistent with this tendency, a comprehensive biography of Innis has yet to be written, and one has little idea of exactly what Innis wrote over his lifetime, when these items were written, or in what circumstances. Indeed, it is not even entirely clear when he embarked on his so-called turn towards communications, and how the massive History of Communications
document figured in his later work. One does not know, for instance, whether the work was intended to be revised for publication, or whether it was more of a repository of thoughts and material that was meant to be drawn upon for publication in discrete bits. What is at stake is the fact that our understanding of Innis’ work has largely emerged in the absence of what could very well have been his most insightful statement about how media have emerged and developed. This would suggest that our collective memory of Innis’ thought is (in line with Innis’ own mode of analysis) a highly biased one rooted in a particular monopoly of knowledge that has become entrenched.

I argue that the fate of the manuscript was largely determined by the process through which Innis’ unfinished and unpublished works were dealt with after his death in 1952. In particular, as Shoesmith (1993) persuasively suggests, one must give attention to the deliberations of a special executors’ committee that was struck to make assessments about the publishability of particular works. The initial appraisal given to the History of Communications manuscript by members of the committee provided the point of departure for three different efforts to have the document published, all of which failed. These three failures, I argue, were linked to the initial interpretation of the document provided by the committee. In the absence of a published version of the text or, indeed, of even a non-archival version printed on paper, the impressions by the executors’ committee, as refracted through the three ill-fated publishing ventures, have become the basis for the myths that now surround the manuscript.

The committee in question consisted of “Mrs. Innis, Donald [Innis], and Professors Donald Creighton, W.T. Easterbrook and S.D. Clark” (Christian, 1980, p. xvii). They were to “supervise the collection of Innis’s papers, and to decide which of these ought to be published” (p. xvii). As Brian Shoesmith indicates, the fate of the communication manuscript was very much affected by the early decisions of the supervisory committee. Indeed, it was involved with the first two efforts to have the manuscript published: “The first was in the period shortly after Innis’ death…. The second and most significant attempt was in 1963, and the third is the current work around the manuscript that I am not able to comment upon here” (Shoesmith, 1993, p. 125).

Rather surprisingly, Shoesmith fails to examine another effort to prepare the manuscript around 1970, which, in my view, reveals a great deal about the tensions and politics that underlay the ongoing non-publication of the manuscript. As we shall see, this effort also showed the long-term effect of the original committee’s thinking and orientation.

Originally, the executors’ committee, according to Shoesmith (1993), “did not know what to do with the manuscript, nor what to make of his communication writings, which they judged to be aberrant and, in effect, dangerous to Innis’ reputation as a scholar” (p. 122). Nevertheless, the group did consider preparing the manuscript for publication. To this end, it hired research and editorial assistants who began to work with the document. However, editing the document proved to be no easy task given the scope and magnitude of Innis’ venture. Moreover, the
executors were not only unable to give sufficient time to working with the manuscript, but had difficulty assessing its significance in relation to Innis’ better known writings on economic history (Shoesmith, 1993). In view of the lack of editorial expertise and direction given to the project, it was not surprising that the University of Toronto Press found the manuscript submitted to it for publication to be incomplete, in need of further editorial work, and not easily categorized (Shoesmith, 1993). These judgments were reached on the basis of two very negative reports from readers that were commissioned in 1954-55.

Given that the publication of works in communication in Canada was virtually non-existent prior to the coming to prominence of Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s, it is not surprising that the readers responded in a negative way. Still, one must wonder how much effort had been given to the revisions and to what extent the committee was committed to its publication. As S. D. Clark, one of the committee members, noted in a letter to Mary Quayle Innis, while the communications manuscript “had the appearance of being in a state of completion it was felt that he [Innis] would have wanted to have revised it and there was a very great fear on our part that its publication might damage his reputation.” Clark added ruefully that “Looking back, I cannot feel certain that the committee acted wisely” (in Shoesmith, 1993, p. 126). This suggests that the committee believed that the publication of further works in communication would further diminish Innis’ reputation as a scholar. Or it may have felt that it lacked the expertise to revise the manuscript in a manner consistent with the standards of scholarship that Innis had established.

In any case, the committee gave its attention to matters which it evidently felt were more pressing, such as reissuing The Fur Trade in Canada (Innis, 1930) and The Cod Fisheries (Innis, 1940), and preparing and overseeing the publication of a set of essays on economic history (Innis, 1956). While the History of Communications project was given a lower priority, it was not abandoned altogether. In 1963, S. D. Clark and Mary Innis wrote to Marsh Jeanerette, editor of the University of Toronto Press, and to Dr. Trueman, Director of the Canada Council, requesting support for the publication of the manuscript. Jeanerette wrote back to Mary Innis and included copies of the original readers’ reports. These letters, though shocking to her, appeared to confirm her own doubts about the manuscript’s publishability. Instead, she turned her attention to arranging for the republication of The Bias of Communication, along with another volume of Innis’ articles—a project which never materialized (Shoesmith, 1993).³

Shoesmith’s article leaves one with the impression that nothing happened with the manuscript between 1963 and an unspecified movement currently underway to publish the manuscript. Yet around 1969-70 a major effort was in the works to have the unpublished manuscript see the light of day, originating in the CRTC (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission).⁴ In reading through material related to this initiative, one not only realizes how particular entrenched perceptions of the work affected its treatment, but what sorts of impressions had informed the earlier attempts to have the work published. By this
time, it appears that the original executors committee was no longer operable. Nevertheless, two of the original committee members—Mary Quayle Innis and Donald Innis—were involved in the deliberations, carrying forward views of Innis’ communications work that had taken form earlier. They were joined by Northrup Frye, the eminent Professor of English at the University of Toronto; George Ferguson, Editor Emeritus of The Montreal Star, as well as the editors and representatives of the CRTC.

Perhaps the key person involved in the reassessment of the manuscript was Ferguson. Harold Innis and Ferguson had become best of friends after having met in the mid-1930s at a “joint meeting of the Historical and Political Science Associations at Queen’s, in Kingston” (Ferguson, 1965, pp. 4-5). One reason that the friendship ripened between the two men, according to Ferguson, was that he (Ferguson) was a “practising professional communicator.” Even though Innis “had plenty of theories provided not only by other theoreticians but by himself,” in Ferguson “he had a butterfly truly impaled for ardent and intimate study.” While Ferguson was impressed with the intensity with which Innis began to study communications, he was less than enthusiastic about Innis’ grasp of the subject. Indeed, he felt that when Innis “started his communication project he had bitten off a much bigger mouthful than he could digest in a mere decade of time.” Despite the effort that he put into his study of communications, he was less than enthusiastic about Innis’ grasp of the subject. As we shall see, this dismissal of Innis’ communications work by Ferguson spilled over into his views on the publishability of the History of Communications manuscript. Perhaps most significantly, it appeared to be through Ferguson’s counsel that Mary Innis became increasingly sceptical about the publication prospects of her late husband’s unfinished manuscript.

The CRTC project
As Mary Quayle Innis recounted in a letter to George Ferguson (1969), dealing with the “Communication mss” had been a difficult and formidable task. While she felt that it was “a diamond mine of material,” she also noted that “facts in such alarming quantities are a bit alarming.” This opinion was shared by Donald Innis who “was similarly somewhat daunted.” It appeared that nothing further was going to be done with the manuscript “till the excited C.R.T.C. people appeared, to my great amazement.” It appears that the interest by the representatives of the CRTC in the manuscript had been sparked by a meeting with Ferguson, who in the summer of 1969 had “talked to the CRTC people and suggested a scheme [he] had cooked up which would involve a new edition of Harold’s published works in communications, plus substantial use of the famous manuscript which started all this going. I gather they didn’t like it but have heard nothing since.” Ferguson was quite miffed by the CRTC members having taken his ideas in a different direction without consulting with him about their plans. As a friend and confidante of Mary Innis, who was struggling with her own views on how the manuscript should be dealt with, Ferguson was more than willing to fuel her growing doubts about the CRTC venture.
Mary Quayle Innis was obviously both perplexed by the interest of the CRTC in the manuscript, and suspicious of its motives. As she mused to Ferguson,

I have been searching for a rationale behind the whole approach of the C.R.T.C. and this is my theory. “Communications” is the good word, a touchstone, a keynote. What books, lectures, talks are committed in its name! Courses are given, seminars, conferences on the subject. Yet it has so recently been conjured up that it has no background, no foundation, no roots.... So new a field needs a foundation to link the communication arts together and to give them a history. This mss could be their Blackstone or Adam Smith. I believe this is what the young men see. Or is it?

Nevertheless, Mary Innis had also been swayed by the interest taken in the manuscript by Northrup Frye and Ferguson and by Marshall McLuhan’s growing prominence “as a moving spirit behind the scenes.” This led her to feel that the manuscript deserved further consideration:

Who knows what Harold would have done with this mss? Would he have produced several books from it or one mighty synthesis? Certainly it is raw material which he would have transformed. But as raw material it might be useful to many other people and should be available. (Innis to Ferguson, 1969)

Shortly thereafter, Mary Innis was given a much clearer sense of the transformation of the manuscript that the CRTC had in mind. Accompanied by her son Donald and Northrup Frye, she met with the two editors, a staff member, and CRTC President Pierre Juneau. The purpose of the meeting, as Donald Innis wrote in a summary of what took place, was “to discuss [the Innis manuscript] and what might be done to make it publishable” (Innis, 1969). To oversee the publication of the manuscript, it was proposed that something called the “Innis Communications Corporation” be established to “collect money to be used for the publication of this book.” Perhaps the most unorthodox aspect of the CRTC plan was its proposal for “independent publication of the Innis manuscript.” This meant that “the CRTC would have complete control of it.” It would allow the CRTC to edit it in the way they wanted, to include in it whatever they wished, and “to distribute it more effectively.” The distribution was to be done through subscription: “They would send out advertising, and people were supposed to buy copies at $100 a set of three volumes (a thousand copies would be printed). Each copy would be numbered, and this was the way in which the printing would be paid for.”

Prospective subscribers were to be sent a three-page letter inviting them to subscribe to the 1,300-page publication. This letter explained that the CRTC was interested in the manuscript because 1970 would mark the 50th anniversary of the first licensed radio in Canada. The letter also mentioned that, as an added bonus, each volume would include “some early Chinese rice paper.”

As Donald Innis reported, the group “didn’t get too far” with “the most important problem,” that of editing the manuscript. It was decided that an editorial board would be formed to oversee the editing of the manuscript. This was to consist of Donald Innis, Mary Innis, Northrup Frye, and the two editors. While
Donald Innis (along with Mary Innis and Frye) had some doubts about the plan for “independent publication,” he was pleased because control over the final form of the manuscript was retained. In a matter akin to his father, he took a keen interest in how the CRTC had gone about mapping the “critical path” or the “écheancier” of the proposed trajectory of publication. After describing in great detail the purpose and colour of the various ribbons used to indicate the publication process, he noted dryly that “we are at the point where the manuscript had been obtained and seven xerox copies had been made”:

The steps to be done from now on would be the editing, the financing, setting up the legal organization … which would receive the money and then the publisher would have to be contacted. And, as Mr. Juneau said in a joking way, they had good resources for publicity. I suppose he meant having contact with all these other radio and television outlets. (Innis, 1969)

However, judging by the subsequent correspondence between Mary Innis and George Ferguson, and between Ferguson and Northrup Frye, the CRTC project became an object of increasing concern. In particular, George Ferguson, who had long been sceptical about the value of Innis’ communication writings in general, encouraged and supported Mary Innis’ growing doubts about the CRTC venture. As both Donald Innis and Northrup Frye were not giving the matter very much attention, Mary Innis requested that Ferguson “do please whatever they ask you to be in this so-called Corporation. Am I doing the right thing in having got into all this? Maybe I am the one who is crazy. And illustrations—as if a 1300 page manuscript needed to be overloaded with of all things illustrations. You can see how badly you are needed.” Mary Innis suggested a much more modest venture that would involve “using part of Harold’s mss or selections from it—a kind of festschrift. Then at some point the whole thing might be xeroxed or some such process for the use of libraries and students” (Innis to Ferguson, 1970). In his response, Ferguson also expressed his doubts about the CRTC venture, and his unwillingness to serve on the editorial committee. He also provided a bleak assessment of the manuscript’s value and its prospects for eventual publication:

I am fundamentally out of sympathy with what they propose to do. The document is not a book at all. It represents a very substantial working paper which Harold used before distilling his own insights in his published works, but the document itself does not provide any fresh insights. It is, to be sure, a massive scholarship but I really can’t see it in book form even if it is decked out with what the CRTC boys call “iconography” on which they are very keen. Indeed, I question whether its publication would enhance Harold’s reputation even when illuminated by Elspeth Chisholm’s running down of sources. Such footnotes would amplify our knowledge of the enormous research Harold undertook before getting down to the task of writing for publication, but I possessed that knowledge before. (Ferguson to Innis, 1970a)

He noted once more that “I really played out whatever role I had in this business last summer and when the CRTC rejected my idea, I so informed my principals and told them the matter was closed, so far as I was concerned.” In his view,
“this lot of communicators seem to communicate very badly.” Ferguson was also quite critical of the proposal to offer the book for sale at $100 and questioned the CRTC’s principles, noting that “the broadcasting industry, for obvious reasons, are frightened of the CRTC, and if the CRTC offered a book at $100 I’m sure it would be widely bought” (Ferguson to Innis, 1970a).

Ferguson was also in contact with Northrup Frye about the manuscript. Relations between Frye and Mary Quayle had evidently become strained, as Frye was not speaking with her. Aware of this tension, Ferguson noted to Mary Innis that the copyright to the manuscript belonged to her. “This means that,” he counselled her, “if you are driven enough, you can refuse to let them have it; or you can dictate the use it may be put to and the methods of its publication” (Ferguson to Innis, 1970b). Unwilling to be a member of the committee, yet interested in being involved in the deliberations, Ferguson wrote to Frye (1970a), “excusing [his] intrusion into something which is not[his] business.” Ferguson stated the concern he shared with Mary Innis about the plan for selling the volume:

The bulk [of purchases] would … come from the broadcasting industry. A book carrying the imprimatur of the CRTC, or at least its formal sponsorship, would sell. The industry has every reason to keep in the good books of the CRTC, and many of its members would think $100 a cheap price to pay to curry a little favour in the right quarter. I added that I thought Innis himself would reject this kind of merchandising, and she agreed with me. (Ferguson to Frye, 1970a)

Frye regretted that Mary Innis was unhappy with the project, but nonetheless did not feel that “there is a fundamental mistake in the plan” (Frye to Ferguson, 1970). After reviewing the earlier problems with publication through the University of Toronto Press, he noted that “it was felt that, in view of the enormously increased interest in the theory of communications, and also in the greater flexibility today about what is publishable, the original publications [objections?] against publication of a manuscript no longer held.” He also challenged Ferguson’s suggestion that the arrangement to sell the volumes through broadcast companies rested on dubious motives: “As for the sale of the book, I should imagine Broadcast Companies probably would purchase it, but their motives in doing so might be as much concerned with a genuine interest in communications theory as with their relationship to the Canadian Radio Television Commission” (Frye to Ferguson, 1970).

Ferguson was unrepentant in his reply:

As to the prospective sale of the book, I realize in a dim kind of way that the private sector of broadcasting is no longer completely in the hands of the pirates with whom I used to do editorial battle in years gone by. My early Christian training reminds me that repentance should never be mocked, so I cannot mock without mocking also the work of the CRTC in drawing attractive crowds to the penitents’ bench. (Ferguson to Frye, 1970b)

Mary Innis had also been corresponding with Northrup Frye about the manuscript, and had made the suggestion to him that a “festschrift” volume be prepared
rather than a version of “History of Communications.” Frye did not address this suggestion directly but, rather, informed her that “the Canadian Radio Television commission has turned a formidable organization on this manuscript and that they might very well have their entire job done on time. The amount of work they have already done seems to me staggering” (Frye to Innis, 1970). He also emphasized that the manuscript had been in a virtually unpublishable state when it was considered by the University of Toronto Press for publication in the early 1960s, as reflected in the original negative reports from the readers. However, in the period since these reports, Frye stated, “a great deal had happened in the growth of the importance of communication and in the growing sense of flexibility about what is publishable” (Frye to Innis, 1970).

This optimistic view of the manuscript’s publication prospects was reflected in the draft of the introduction that Frye wrote for the volume. In Frye’s view, the manuscript was “an extended working paper … which would eventually have become a General History of Communication Media” (Frye, 1970). He emphasized that the manuscript was now publishable because criteria of publishability had changed:

It is not, strictly speaking, a “book”, and twenty years ago, when normally only “books” were published, it would have been neither practicable nor desirable to put these notes into the present form. But in this age of information retrieval and “print-out” there is a good deal more flexibility about what can and should be published. What is true as a general principle is particularly true of this work, in view of the dramatic increase of interest in communication theory and of appreciation of Dr. Innis’s pioneering work on it. (Frye, 1970, p. 1)

Frye also provided a number of reasons for why the manuscript should be published, “even though it represents a process and not a finished product.” Frye felt that it provided a “fascinating glimpse” of how Innis collected material and used it to work towards a “final synthesis.” He found, moreover, that the text served as “an illuminating supplement to Dr. Innis’s published books,” showing the “kind of historical contexts … he had planned to provide for them.” Finally, Frye believed that the work would provide a corrective to the ahistorical work in communications that had proliferated in the recent period. In his view, it was “the only attempt … to supply a comprehensive historical prospective for the subject” (all quotes Frye, 1970, p. 1).

By the spring of 1970, however, it appeared that Frye’s confidence in the CRTC’s ability to see the manuscript through to publication had been misplaced. Elspeth Chisholm, who had just finished her stint tracking down the sources for the volume, reported to Ferguson on difficulties that had developed in the preparation of the manuscript (Ferguson to Innis, 1970c). Ferguson had become even more certain about the project’s demise in early 1971. A friend at the CRTC “had heard nothing but suspected that the research staff had their hands so full with current CRTC research that the book had got pushed aside” (Ferguson to Innis, 1971a). He also broached the possibility of Mary Innis blocking the CRTC publication of the manuscript through legal means. However, this would have been a
“rough decision,” and he counselled her against taking that route. What Ferguson did suggest was that Mary Innis force the issue with the University of Toronto Press. If it was not prepared to publish the volume, Ferguson doubted whether another publisher could be found. Mary Innis could then demand the manuscript back, as the CRTC would have no other choices. Ferguson then again reiterated his view of the manuscript:

the MSS, as you know, is not a book at all but marvellous working papers that would have been made into something utterly different had Harold lived. (That lay behind my notion that a v[ery] good editor could have woven much of it into the texts of his published works, but that idea is dead now even if it had been as good an idea as I thought it might be.) (Ferguson to Innis, 1971a)

Ferguson also took the opportunity to castigate the CRTC once again:

I have never had so much as a scratch of a pen from any of the CRTC people. Perhaps that fact might be used in some subsidiary way in any negotiation with CRTC, for, as I understand it, you were insistent I should be a member of the “foundation” or whatever title they devised as a body to see the thing through. But that, of course, might just cause acrimonious in-fighting in a struggle to re-possess the Mss. (Ferguson to Innis, 1971a)

Sensing that the simmering tension was going to come to a head, Ferguson offered to “talk tactics” if Mary Innis felt that he could play “any useful role” with all those involved with the project (Ferguson to Innis, 1971a).

Ferguson backed off from his alarmist interpretations when he received more concrete information about the status of the manuscript. He learned that the University of Toronto Press was not in the picture as a possible publisher, that work on the manuscript was carried on sporadically by someone “brought up from CBC international service,” and that Mary Innis owned the copyright, had never abandoned it, “and that publication could not be done without [her] express permission” (Ferguson to Innis, 1971b). Nevertheless, there were other signs that the days for the project were numbered. Ferguson learned that “the Treasury Board has been cracking down on CRTC expenditures and thereby curtailing some of their activities. [He assumed] from this that, if and when CRTC proposes an appropriation for publication of the well-known Mss, there might be trouble getting it through.” Moreover, Ferguson had heard that an interested party “had twice written to CRTC to find out what was cooking but that his letter had not been answered” (Ferguson to Innis, 1971b).

**Tensions in the publication project**

Aside from the mounting problems in the CRTC venture, it appears that the publication committee itself was in growing disarray. Moreover, the ultimate failure of the manuscript to find a publication outlet was at least in part attributable to the clash between two different visions of the manuscript that had coalesced. The editors at the CRTC believed that the manuscript was publishable in its present form, supplemented by “iconography.” Given that cutting back the text from the original length was never an issue, it is unclear what their own editorial task
involved. This vision of the prospective volume was given the blessing of Northrup Frye, who felt that the task was justifiable because the rules of publishing had loosened sufficiently so that even a “process,” in the form of a working paper, could see the light of day. This was a vision of the text and the rules of publishability that were not shared by Mary Innis, George Ferguson, and the vanguard of academic publishing of the day, the University of Toronto Press. Mary Quayle, protective of what she felt to be the proper image of her late husband, wished the volume to be in line with both the works published in his lifetime, and those published posthumously. Ferguson, for his part, was convinced that Innis had said all he had to say about communications in his published writings. There may have been a more fundamental reason for Ferguson’s finding fault with Innis’ communications research. As Ferguson noted, “Harold Innis believed profoundly that the best tradition civilization developed was the oral tradition. He distrusted my own discipline, the tradition of the printed word. He hated the scribes and the pharisees, the upholders of the written word” (Ferguson, 1965, pp. 6-7).

Ferguson recounted the time that he, his wife, and Innis had attended a funeral at which St. Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians was read. Afterwards, when Ferguson marvelled at the glory of the language, Innis remarked “‘but you know what Paul was saying, — that once truth is embodied in the printed word—that is, in law, — it becomes restricted, subject to interpretation by lesser men, and ultimately false’” (in Ferguson, 1965, p. 6).

Ferguson also despaired of Innis’ writing on communications. He noted that Innis “despised the written word, and his own writing was a curious kind of shorthand that needed its own special interpreters. In his essays on communications, I would puzzle and fret myself over half a page” (p. 6). As a champion of the press and the printed word, Ferguson could not have been more at odds with Innis on this score. He believed that the “newspaper … assumes a new importance as … a stabilizing influence on our society,” and “the printed word … is better for society than sole dependence on electronics” (Ferguson, 1965, pp. 6-7). Given that History of Communications critically examines the history of paper and printing in relation to the monopolies of knowledge found in Western civilization, it was not at all surprising that Ferguson was so lukewarm about its publication. Accordingly, he and Mary Innis converged on the idea that what should appear was a Festschrift. This would have served the dual purpose of celebrating Innis’ stature while, at the same time, highlighting the communications work that had been deemed acceptable within the canon that the guardians of Innis’ legacy sought to create.

As it turned out, neither the CRTC publication project for the History of Communications manuscript, nor the proposal of George Ferguson and Mary Quayle Innis to put together an Innis festschrift, were to materialize. Indeed, it may very well have been the case that the inability of all of those involved with publishing Innis’ work to find common ground contributed to the failure of Innis’ manuscript to see the light of day in some form. This non-publication of A History of Commu-


communications was also likely rooted in the manner in which the document was treated. Within the voluminous material pertaining to the publication project, there is virtually no detailed discussion of the volume’s contents. What one finds is a series of phantasmic images that owe their shape and colouration more to particular rhetorical situations than to their supposed referent. In effect, all of the parties who were involved in the deliberations about the manuscript’s possible publication were victims of the backwardness in Canadian intellectual history. At no point was any effort made to answer such basic questions as: When did the work on it take place?, How did it relate to Innis’ overall oeuvres?, and How much of it had actually been published? Moreover, it appears that no one who read the document tried to understand why the manuscript was written, what Innis was trying to argue in the document, and why it took the form and scope that it did. Moreover, at least as it appears from the documentation available in the material located in the Innis papers, no effort was even made to itemize the contents of the manuscript in terms of its various components. If such preliminary spadework had been done, those who had a stake in the publication of the document could have been in a much better position to not only assess its merits, but to arrive at the most appropriate course of action for making it publicly available. In the absence of a clear understanding of what the document was about, and how the purpose and meaning which Innis had given to it was rooted in the broader context of his intellectual work during the period in question, it was almost impossible for the manuscript’s readers not to become bogged down in the massive thicket of facts and details that are found in the document in such abundance, and to conclude that it was little more than a “set of reading notes.” In what follows, I will attempt to provide a preliminary corrective to the rather limited reading of the document that arguably contributed to its subsequent neglect and non-publication. After providing an overview of what the manuscript is about, I will venture forth some ideas about the ideas, concerns, and organizing principles that underlay the empirical material that Innis presents. While a detailed exploration of the context for the writing of the manuscript awaits further investigation, I will make some conjectures about how the manuscript was linked to Innis’ published writings on communication.

Reading the manuscript
Finding out what the manuscript is about, as I have discovered, is easier said than done. The current state of the manuscript certainly illustrates its own rather perverse bias of communication. The only original printed version that I know of is located in the University of Toronto Archives. As Shoesmith (1993) points out, it has a palimpsest quality to it; the original manuscript is accompanied by the various layers of the versions that appeared as part of the CRTC editing project that never reached fruition. Microfilm versions of the work can be found in six Canadian libraries, including the McLennan library at McGill University. Determined researchers (I suppose like myself) can have a copy of the microfilm made. One can then attempt to wrestle with a massive text unfolding in a seemingly endless fashion across a visually unfriendly screen of a microfilm reader. The task is made even more formidable by the wildly inchoate state of the manuscript.
Fragments of texts (some bearing titles and others not) are interspersed with huge chunks (hundreds of pages in length) written in chapter-like form. As if to ensure that the reader—like the ill-fated Charlie and the MTA—was destined to enter the text never to return, no table of contents is provided. All one has is the rather terse and forbidding heading:

“A History of Communications”
An Incomplete and Unrevised Manuscript
By H. A. Innis
Microfilmed for Private Circulation

This is followed by the note:

First 3 chapters in Empire and Communications (IV, V, VI)
Other material in Bias of Communications, Changing Concepts of Time.

This cryptic note provides very little indication about the extent to which the material found in the manuscript was re-published elsewhere. It is not clear at all how much of the document was incorporated into these later published works, and the degree of subsequent editing that took place. This description has been commonly taken at face value, with the result that many have come to assume that much of the manuscript (or at least most of its better parts) were published elsewhere. Yet, to my knowledge, no one has actually ever directly compared the manuscript to Innis’ published work, so it still remains to be seen the degree to which it formed a repository for Innis’ studies in the history of communications.

In any event, as an introduction to the body of the work, this short explanatory note is tantamount to a road sign stating “Seriously unpaved and dangerous road: enter at your own risk. You are encouraged to take one of the detours.” Yet it is arguable that none of the detours, better paved as they may be, will take you to the same destination. This becomes quite evident when one actually embarks on the journey of reading through the text.

**Dispelling the myths**

Despite its original title, the manuscript is not about the history of communications, taken *tout court*. Rather, it deals with the history of printing and publishing from around the 10th century (with the coming of paper) to the 20th century. In typical Innisian fashion, great attention is given to the material aspects of printing, including not only the advances in typemaking and typesetting, but also in the development of paper and ink. The overall narrative, however, is not simply one of technological advance. Rather, Innis gives particular attention to the relationship between printing and monopolies of knowledge and power as they shifted and developed over time. As William Christian (1980) so aptly notes, “For Innis the most problematic element of the modern world was mechanization and the associated battery of beliefs and practices that mechanization called forth. If he were to point to one salient cause of the character of modern civilization, it would be the printing press” (p. xiii). This would suggest that *History of Communications* is really about modernity, as attendant upon the development of paper and printing.
What follows is an overview of the manuscript’s content, accompanied by the number of pages for each item. For the untitled treatments (indicated below by “n.t.”), the first few words of each have been used to indicate the piece in question.

- (n.t.) “Classical Literature…,” 18 pp.
- (n.t.) “Within the middle of the 13th Century…,” 9 pp.
- (n.t.) “Chaucer wrote for…,” 6 pp.
- (n.t.) “The Fifteenth Century saw…,” 6 pp.
- (addendum), 5 pp.
- (n.t.) “A newspaper is…,” 18 pp.
- (n.t.) “After the Revolution…,” 12 pp.

The material is presented chronologically, with the various chapters covering developments over the course of succeeding centuries within specific national contexts. This suggests that Innis envisioned history as consisting of a series of interconnected “long durées,” each having particular defining characteristics. Overall, the work consists of 8 large sections (ranging in size from 43 to 307 pages), accompanied by 12 fragments and short treatments (ranging in size from 3 to 19 pages). The first 5 large sections bear chapter numbers from “IV” through “VIII.” The last three large sections appear to correspond to chapters, given their themes and order, but do not bear chapter numbers. This suggests that Innis was still in the process of blocking out the work into specific chapters when the work was interrupted not to be completed. That the first chapter is listed as “chapter IV,” “The Coming of Paper,” suggests that he planned to include three chapters dealing with earlier developments.9

A lengthy initial chapter on the coming of paper is followed by three fragments dealing with particular themes related to the middle ages, namely classical literature, Chaucer, and the thirteenth century. The work then picks up with what is called “chapter V” which deals with “printing in the fifteenth century.” The chapters which follow address similar themes in relation to particular centuries,
moving from the sixteenth through to the nineteenth. The final part of the work breaks down into a series of fragments again. This suggests that Innis planned to integrate some of them into the body of the text (e.g., the Frankfurt Bookfair) and to continue his analysis into the twentieth century (e.g., newspaper press after 1900). The presence of two short excerpts on China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries indicates that he planned to compare outcomes between China and the West.

At first glance, the manuscript covers much of the same ground as Empire and Communications and The Bias of Communication. And, as commentators have been at pains to emphasize, the manuscript largely consists of densely packed factual material, and is quite lacking in the occasional theoretical glosses that accompany his other writings on the history of communications. Nevertheless, it is evident from the way in which the material has been assembled and periodized, and by the interconnected set of themes that recur, that the work represents much more than simply an extended set of reading notes. Giving shape and meaning to the data in question was a framework of analysis which permitted Innis not only to diachronically trace recurring patterns over time, but to juxtapose developments synchronically occurring over space. In effect, the work is implicitly informed by a comparative-historical framework, a mode of analysis which was less consistently adhered to in his other major writings. Innis gives particular attention to how patterns of domination, as rooted in particular monopolies of knowledge and forms of media, create conditions on the margins of society which ultimately lead to challenges from new interests. The ensuing state of affairs is characterized by a struggle between the entrenched power centers and the advocates of change, dialectically leading to the formation of a new order in which a different monopoly of knowledge has taken shape. For instance, in his discussion of the American colonies, he stresses how the British authorities initially used printing to facilitate administration of their overseas possessions. However, the medium was adopted by dissenters to foment resistance to measures that were seen as oppressive, such as the Stamp Act of 1765. The authorities responded with censorship in their efforts to control public opinion. However, these measures proved to be futile, and the British domination was eventually swept away in the American Revolution, the support for which was very much aided and abetted by the dissenting press. As Innis noted, “it became impossible to maintain uniform control of the press throughout the empire and repression in one area was followed by outbursts in other areas” (Innis, A History of Communications, n.d., chap. 8, p. 239). The new order which emerged, as Innis emphasized, was very much marked by the communication medium which fuelled the revolutionary change, namely, the print medium. The American nation-state was grounded in a written constitution and the rule of written law. While the various components of the struggle were unique to colonial America, the general categories of analysis were deployed by Innis in a variety of other historical contexts.

Within this overall configuration of knowledge, power, conflict, and change, Innis covered a broad range of themes, including patronage, religion, propaganda,
public opinion, and education. While these topics figure in his other major writings, they are dealt with in much greater detail and with finer nuance in the History of Communications manuscript. For instance, in Empire and Communications Innis mentions in passing that in the sixteenth century, “a daily bourse at Antwerp required a permanent news service to provide information on the rating of business houses of different nationalities” (Innis, 1986, p. 149). However, in A History of Communications this very same issue is not only amplified in much more detail, but is used as a point of entry for considering how the early development of the news service was implicated in the development of early markets (see chap. 6, p. 113).

Innis deployed this sort of analysis to great effect in making comparisons in developments across both time and space. For the period prior to formation of absolutist states in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Innis’ accounts largely consisted of surveys of developments taking place within various regions and city-states. However, when examining early modernity, his analysis became much more comparative in nature, focusing on how absolutism was giving way to the emergence of publics—as fuelled by the printing industry—within national-state systems. His massive chapter 8 dealing with “the paper and printing industries in the 18th century” is pivotal in this respect. Consisting of discrete sections on Britain, France, the American colonies/United States, and Germany, it offers detailed accounts of the historical trajectories of these nation-states, along with numerous comparisons. Innis notes, for instance, that “The authority of the state over social institutions increased in Germany and decreased in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (chap. 8, p. 205). That Innis sought to demonstrate how the print media intersected with power and public opinion to produce different outcomes in different historically specific settings belies the usual claims that he was a technological determinist.

In tracing out how these broad-scale patterns of conflict and transformation were linked to print media, Innis by no means neglected how the press and journalism operated within particular contexts. While he did not include a great deal of material about how various newspapers and magazines were received, he did offer detailed accounts of the material that they contained. This would suggest that Innis had a paramount interest in how the print media were affecting general mores and sensibilities. For instance, in relation to the role of the press in the American revolution, he stated that:

In 1765 the first attempt to cover events in different colonies was made. The quantity of news increased with agitation and their quality as propaganda improved notably in the accounts of clashes between the troops and the people. By 1774 papers were printing resolutions and assembly activities, and had become a new agency of government. Private letters, extracts of news, London letters by Americans, or by English friends of the colonies, and serial republication of bitter pamphlets were printed. The political essay written by others than the editor began where the argumentative tract left off, were widely reprinted and provided the most effective propaganda. Samuel Adams and Benjamin Franklin used the newspaper to appeal to the reading public. Mate-
rial in the newspapers and broadsides were reprinted in pamphlets. (Innis, *A History of Communications*, n.d., chap. 8, pp. 252-253)

Innis also included a good deal of contemporary literary material which reflexively addressed how people of the day viewed the development of media. Such items go a long way towards dispelling the view that Innis had little sensitivity to literary and cultural matters, but was obsessed with broader structural patterns.11

Whether and in what form the manuscript should have been published I am still unable to judge. But what seems obvious to me is that had those involved with the various publication initiatives spent more time trying to come to terms with its scope and claims rather than reworking the myths that had become attached to it, we might well have had a third major work by Innis on communications to enrich our understanding.

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**Notes**
1. Given that works such as Marx’s massive and unfinished *Grundrisse* have not only been published but have been widely influential, this claim is not as audacious as it might at first seem.
2. For instance, efforts have been made to collect the writings of thinkers such as Weber, Marx, Simmel, and Eric Voegelin into multi-volume series.
3. Based on the analysis provided by Shoesmith (1993), it would be putting it too strongly to suggest that the non-publication of the *History of Communications* manuscript—as manifested in the rejections by the University of Toronto Press in 1954 and 1963—was the result of some sort of conspiracy. Rather, the fact that the document did not appear in a published form could be attributed to the collective inability of the executors to provide the manuscript with the necessary guidance and direction, the lack of fit between the document and the publication criteria of the day, and the relative obscurity of the communications field at the time, which likely made it difficult for the University of Toronto press reviewers to objectively assess the merits of the work’s scholarship and potential impact.
4. The CRTC had been established in 1967-68 to regulate and supervise all aspects of the Canadian broadcasting system, succeeding the Board of Broadcast Governors.
5. This would be along the lines of David Godfrey’s version of *Empire and Communications* (Innis, 1986).
6. This focus is reflected in the new title given to the manuscript during its CRTC phase: “A History of Paper and Printing from the 2nd to the 20th Century.”
7. For instance, one chapter devotes hundreds of pages to the paper-making industry in France.
8. The very choice of material by Innis is quite revealing, particularly if taken in relation to his other published work and his own concerns and interests. I would suggest that it can be read profitably with his “idea file” (Innis, 1980), in progress around the same time, which provides some insight into the meaning and significance behind the terse statements and lengthy descriptions which constitute *A History of Communications*. 
9. As Ian Parker has informed me, the first three chapters were written in holograph, (i.e., by hand) and can be found in the section of the Harold Innis Papers listed as “Empire of Communications.” A portion of this material has been transcribed under the direction of Professor Chris Podmore, formerly of the Department of Communication of the University of Ottawa.

10. The comparative-historical dimension of Innis’ work has largely been overlooked by commentators, most recently Robert Babe (2000). The lack of attention given to this feature of Innis’ mode of analysis likely stems from the lack of familiarity with the approach taken in the History of Communications manuscript.

11. For instance, Innis includes an extensive excerpt from Ben Jonson’s The Staple of News in chapter 8, “The Paper and Printing Industries in the 17th Century.”

References
Innis, Harold Adams. (Undated). A History of Communications. Serials, Microfilms, Humanities and Social Sciences Library, McGill University, Montreal, QC.


