
As a book inaugurating the Canada–United Kingdom Colloquia Series, this essay collection should be appreciated for several reasons. For one thing, “a wider audience” can now benefit from the Colloquia’s gatherings of prominent scholars, representatives of governments, businesses, and mass media. The unique institution, established in 1984, is a bilateral annual forum in which contemporary issues with great social significance are discussed. This particular book represents the submissions to the 1997 colloquium held at Keele University in the United Kingdom.

In addition, the book provides comparisons between distinctive Canadian and British policies and sectorial practices. Richard Collins’ examination of the Canadian and U.K. broadcasting regimes is a case in point. Collins, the Director of Education at the British Film Institute, is convinced that “the ‘communications revolution’ has contributed importantly to pressures on the public service broadcasters in both countries” (p. 199). Nonetheless, he infers, Canada is addressing the issue from a lower position, considering the “flawed” Canadian nationalist media paradigm, especially “in the performance of the standard bearers of Canadian identity in the audio-visual sector, the National Film Board and the CBC” (p. 184).

Finally, for communication studies scholars and students, the publication is interesting because of the contribution it makes to the critical academic discourse on the transformative potential of the “communications revolution,” first, in general (chapters written by Leslie A. Pal, Vincent Mosco, Andrew Reddick, Robin Mansell, and the University of Leeds researchers David Morrison, Michael Svennevig, and Julie Firmstone), and, second, regarding the communications industries in particular (Richard Collins, Stephen McGookin, and Peter J. Nicholson).

In order to produce a coherent collection out of this eclectic set of essays, the editor, Robert Boyce, needed both a defining structural principle and a unifying theoretical framework. He found the former in the policy issue concerns that dominate the contributions to the volume. By arranging the essays along this axis, he succeeded in creating a virtual map of the communications revolution’s impact upon different social sectors (politics, economy, education, mass media, etc.).

As for the latter, by opening the book with Leslie A. Pal’s chapter, “Wired Governance: The Political Implications of the Information Revolution,” an attempt was made to establish a common conceptual ground for the essays that followed. The chapter reviews the academic and policy discourses on Information Technologies’ impact on the political realm by systematizing, categorizing, and analyzing the major achievements in the theoretical field. Regrettably, a preference is given to concepts developed exclusively in North America and in the 1980s and early 1990s, which deprives the reader of a deeper and more sophisticated representation of the influential intellectual constructs since the beginning of the Internet era. In addition, the selection process has left some blind spots, especially in the field of democracy studies, where visionaries such as Manuel Castells and Paul Virilio, for instance, are simply omitted.

The book benefits further from the editor’s efforts to preserve the polemic edges of the essays, which, in any case, should be read in the context of the Colloqua’s diverse representation. With the majority of the authors coming from the academy, “general skepticism toward technological determinism” (p. 4) can be expected as a shared conviction. In fact, the eleven submissions written by scholars, who interrogate contemporary political life, education, media practices, and economic development, have produced cumulative results with demystifying potential.
Although presented only a few years after the Internet entered the public domain, and in the midst of the euphoria on its development as the future dominant medium of communication, the essays do not subscribe to the technocratic visions of positive radical social changes induced by the computer-based technologies of communication. Rather, the emerging new Information Society is depicted as a complicated, multifaceted, and tension-burdened entity. Sharing a common critical view on late capitalism’s dynamics, the scholars argue that the new communicative forms are not going to change the basic dynamics of capitalism or, what is even more absurd, to contradict “the logic from which they come” (p. 58). Instead, the authors predict that “the increased communicative capacity will be put to work in support of existing structures, and at the political level will probably heighten existing inequalities of economic opportunity” (p. 58).

The underlying premise of the book is that the interplay of technological, political, economic, and cultural factors has induced a continuous paradigm-shift process in different social sectors. Hence, it is this interplay (and not the technological factors in isolation, or the “communications revolution” per se) that should constitute the research focus of the new Information Society studies.

The authors (all of them, in fact) do not regard technology as the only decisive agent of social change. For them, the late 1990s fascination with the Internet and other digital technological forms, promoted exclusively on the bases of economic growth, should be complemented by a recognition of the constraining or, equally important, stimulating potential of the social, political, and cultural contexts. Despite the broadly accepted claim of a paradigm shift in the social sciences from a nation-state-centered to a civil-society-centered argument, the contributors to the volume still see national government as the single most responsible and socially accountable agent. Whether to free the potential of the new technologies or to prevent the trend of increasing inequalities from further development, the State is to be expected and required to initiate adequate political and institutional changes.

The validity of this reliance on “responsible government” is tested by Andrew Reddick on Canadian Information Highway policy development, and, particularly, on public-access issues. The author outlines the shift in the Canadian government’s position on communication policy questions: from a universal-access paradigm, where communication networks are seen as utilities and, according to the ideal of participatory democracy, affordable access is ensured to both optional services and essential services, to one of “consumer choice,” where selections are shaped “by consumer power in the marketplace based on willingness or ability to pay” (p. 86). Despite the sharp criticism aimed directly at the Canadian government, Reddick still subscribes to the view that even in the conditions of globalization “only the state has the power and authority to make or change policy and regulation, and thereby create marketplaces” (p. 103). Consequently, the author advocates a move back to the “mixed approach” of regulating the communication infrastructure development, as has been the case historically in Canada. He envisions, for instance, regulatory requirements for corporate contributions on behalf of long-distance telephone carriers, as the need for computer-based public information grows. Building a larger conceptual framework for his argument, he reaches the general conclusion that “affordable access” is a fundamental right of the individual citizen sanctioned by the requirements of the participatory-democracy ideal.

The essays included in the book represent a variety of research approaches: from critical reviews of the Information Technologies literature to comparative examinations and broadly designed studies. Nevertheless, the editor is right to claim a common methodological denominator for all of them: the contributions to the volume are painted “with a broad brush, dealing not with specific applications but rather with the broader social, economic, and political implications of the technological innovation—in short, with the extent or
depth of the revolution” (p. 4). In this respect, the only exceptions, seemingly, are Vincent Mosco’s investigation of the high-tech growth region or technopolis as a site of political power, and Stephen McGookin’s chapter on the revolutionizing effect of the Internet on media-content production.

Indeed, the “broad brush painting” metaphor successfully grasps the core characteristic of the project: to outline the profile of the changes without studying them deeply. It can be speculated that this “reflective stance” is due to the “impossibility of predicting where information and communications technology is leading” (p. 4). This, in turn, explains the preoccupation with the political and policy resonance of the communications revolution, which is palpable in most of the essays. For the authors, in times of a high-level uncertainty, government institutions are the most reliable instruments for tempering the damaging social trends.

While understanding and respecting the editor’s choice of the project’s scope and complexity, I regret the absence of other important dimensions of the “communications revolution.” The pervasive digital media will, inevitably, affect the very core of human perceptual experience and, consequently, the epistemological foundations of our civilization (let us return here to Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and even Walter Benjamin!). On the other hand, the new network technologies that provide the infrastructure for the emerging Global Information Society require, themselves, collaborative international efforts in order for the sustainability of the technological systems to be ensured. The radical cultural changes and the emergence of global governance structures and policies are only two additional research territories, but they are suggestive of the deeper layers of the “communications revolution” that need to be detected and explored.

The Communications Revolution, arguably, is the most significant dynamic of our time, and Canada and Britain are at the forefront of the radical changes. While we have to agree with the scholars from the University of Leeds that “being present in a period of transformation is no guarantee that one can predict outcomes” (p. 58), researchers in both countries share the privilege to experience, observe, and examine “first hand” the technology’s impact on every aspect of our lives.

In this sense, the essay collection demonstrates how the opportunity for collaborative research that the Canada–United Kingdom Colloquia provides has been successfully employed by individual researchers and teams to confront the challenges of such multidimensional phenomena as the “communications revolution” and its implications.

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