
Claims for the necessity of “updating and restructuring” yet another edition of a textbook may at times be tenuous, but not this time. Remarkably, the Canadian communication landscape has changed significantly since the last edition of *Mass Communication in Canada* (Lorimer & McNulty, 1996) just five years ago, enough to warrant the Lorimer & Gasher updated and somewhat restructured fourth incarnation.

The richness of this specifically Canadian material remains. This textbook does the crucial work of describing and often analyzing the communication contexts, institutions, industries, and processes within this country. Debates within communications scholarship are skillfully approached, as are debates within Canadian society on the direction that our institutions of communication should take. The considerable focus on mass media also has not changed. For classroom users, the most significant addition to the text is the increased exploration of, and emphasis on, the Internet. The fourth edition corrects the omissions that the expansion of the Internet had already created before the 1990s were even finished. Students who are eager to discuss the impact and uses of the Internet are now given the framework within which to do so. Students (and their teachers) who are equally eager to use the World Wide Web in their studies will find assistance in this text. Lorimer & Gasher have chosen to add many exemplary, illustrative—or sometimes just interesting—URLs at the bottom of pages and the end of chapters. A discussion of British cultural studies is accentuated with a cyber-address for an article on the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies; a newspaper overview is enhanced by the URLs for Canada’s major news organizations.

Some users of the text may find the URLs are a nice “idea” but not really practical. After all, who is going to bother to head over to the computer and start typing in a bunch of URLs? It is too cumbersome. It would probably be (even) more likely to encourage use of this feature if the URLs were already on the computer screen in the form of hypertext links right in the text of the “book.” For this, it would need to be online, something that actually may happen in some form. The speed of expansion in what Lorimer & McNulty (1996) termed “public communication” both created the need for this revised text and enabled an Internet text which can keep up with the pace of that change.

In its use as a resource for learning, the textbook has been enhanced with another new feature: a study guide at the end of each chapter. This section includes a half-dozen questions for students to ponder as they digest the material or, for those professors who follow the time-honoured tradition of using textbook study-guide questions in class, for teachers to use to test the learning of students. The study guide is helpful not only for identifying the key ideas in the chapter, but also for encouraging the raising of issues, problems, and questions that follow from the chapter’s discussion.

Divided into the same institutionally convenient twelve chapters as the third edition, the new *Mass Communication in Canada* has altered the content of some of these chapters. The influence of communication, definition and explanation of the spheres of mass communication, government and the media, media content, and audiences are discussed in chapters 1 through 5 respectively. Chapter 6 on law and policy concentrates on telecommunications and broadcasting. Cultural industries are newly foregrounded via the overview of law and policy in chapter 7. Issues of ownership move to chapter 8, followed by news-making in chapter 9. Chapter 10 addresses technology and communications. A reconception of geopolitics as “globalization” is now in chapter 11. The final chapter is something of an overview, but also discusses current communication trends in a “digital age.”

The pedagogue who prefers a unit of communication theory faces a patchwork of readings across chapters with this text. Theories of mass communication and their applications do not have their own chapters. Rather, theoretical and analytical perspectives are
introduced and discussed where they are relevant to the material presented. For example, cultural studies is found in chapter 5 (on media and audiences), while political economy is applied to media content in chapter 4. For the student audience of this text, locating theory in a chapter of its own could be unnecessarily abstract and even obfuscate the schools of thought. The organization of Mass Communication in Canada works to clarify the theoretical perspectives for an introductory class by demonstrating how they are applied in our study of the media.

Projects of clarification and simplification have met with some success in the fourth edition. Some may not appreciate the nuances lost to simplification; however, I find that the tendency here is toward reconceiving areas of needless confusion. In this edition, for instance, the distinction between “communication” and “communications” is gone. I believe it is much more important for students engaged with the definitions of chapter 2 to come away with an understanding of mass communication versus public communication than to consternate over when to put an “s” on communication.

The demands on a textbook are different than those on other types of books. Thus, the essential question with which I am concerned is not the insightfulness of the critiques nor the rigour of the research. Rather, the essential question for Mass Communication in Canada is the utility of the book for the learning experience. Having used the third edition in class, I find that the fourth edition presents a simple, though not simplistic, overview of mass communication in Canada. Even the limitation of such an overview—that it skims through issues which could be given more dimensionality, often necessitating additional readings—is at least partly taken on by the offering of Web-based readings of relevant articles as well as primary materials. The ability of Lorimer & Gasher to describe the subject with clarity and at the same time continue to open space for some important questions facing Canadian spheres of communication makes Mass Communication in Canada a useful introduction to the study designated in its title. Used wisely, this textbook presents both teachers and students with the components for an excellent, timely study of mass communication in the Canadian context.

Reference

Charlene Vacon
Concordia University