Discovering “The Significance of Communication”: Harold Adams Innis as Social Constructivist

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Abstract: The complexity of Innis’ texts has led to the streamlining of his main ideas and arguments into a sharply reduced abstract. This study juxtaposes Innis’ texts with this generally accepted précis and proposes its modification, mainly by way of understanding Innis as a social constructivist and communication determinist. On the basis of this construction, the study explores the origins of Innis’ approach and methods, considering continuities from his earlier work in political economy, the influence of the Chicago School, and his perspective as a civically involved Canadian, academic and official. The article concludes by considering the relevance of Innis’ ideas and approach to the analysis of our contemporary communications environment and the current state of communication research.

Résumé : La complexité des textes d’Innis a entraîné la simplification par d’autres de ses idées et arguments principaux, ce qui a mené à un résumé profondément réducteur de sa pensée. Cette étude juxtapose les textes d’Innis avec ce résumé généralement accepté et propose sa modification, surtout en suggérant une perception d’Innis comme constructiviste social et déterministe communicationnel. L’étude se fonde sur cette perception pour explorer les origines de l’approche et des méthodes d’Innis tout en considérant leur continuité par rapport à ses premières œuvres en économie politique, l’influence de l’école de Chicago et sa perspective en tant que Canadien, académicien et officiel qui s’impliquait civiquement. L’article conclut en considérant la pertinence des idées et de l’approche d’Innis pour l’analyse de la communication contemporaine et les recherches actuelles en communication.

Keywords: Harold Adams Innis; Chicago School; Orality/oral culture; Political economy; Technology theory; Toronto School/Transformation theory

Communication technologies represent an interface of mind and matter: they are the physical means for representing, manipulating, conveying, and storing knowledge and ideas. A reasonable proposition would therefore suggest that significant changes in media technologies, and in the communication environments they

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shape, would be related to transformations in the life of the mind and to changes in collective mentalité. Further, should we happen to hold that ideas drive behaviour and action, that same proposition would imply, by extension, that shifts in communication technology may relate to significant changes in society and culture, even in the human condition generally. This simple proposition was the focus of a body of scholarly work produced by Canadian scholar Harold Adams Innis in the middle of the past century.

Innis was then Canada’s foremost economic historian and political economist, a leader of Canadian academe who exerted an important influence on the shaping of national economic policy. He had specialized in the production and distribution of North American staples and the institutions governing the nexus of those staples and their markets. But in his later years Innis shifted his scholarly focus to the ecumenical historical study of the production and dissemination of knowledge and the shaping of cultures, as they related to technological media and their institutional environments. Innis’ odyssey into the realm of communications was abruptly discontinued by his death at the age of 58, fifty-two years ago.

This special issue of the Canadian Journal of Communication dedicated to Innis and his legacy is issued in a period uniquely aware of, and perplexed by, thoroughgoing change in communications and the technologies underpinning them. True enough, throughout the modern era (as perhaps in all others) people were uniformly impressed by what they thought was the unprecedented degree to which new technologies were transforming their lives. Indeed, it is questionable whether our generation has a better claim than any other to revolutionary technological change in everyday life. Yet the past decade or two have a marked distinction in the historical evolution of technological gadgetry, for in perhaps no other period in history has technological progress, as applied to daily life, focused so sharply on a single aspect of human activity as it has focused recently on processes of communication.

The radical change in the practice of mediated communications in our times has spurred efforts to understand the relation of communication technologies to other aspects of the human experience. Surprisingly, Innis’ great legacy has been largely overlooked in this project of re-understanding media environments as transformed by technology. Even his successors, in what some call the “Toronto School” of medium-focused analysis of communication, most notably his junior colleague Marshall McLuhan, have fared better than their pathfinder. This neglect of one of the richest veins of thought as regards the meaning of media technologies—and one of the most broadly construed attempts at understanding the dynamics of their historical evolution—is both unfortunate and curious.

One reason for the marginalization of Innis in our contemporary media debate may be related to the unique nature of his written legacy. For where Innis’ works on Canadian economic development are complex but coherent, the body of communication texts that follow appears more like a bag of tricks Innis played on his fellow scholars. His communication scholarship is seen by many as opaque, contradictory, occasionally even mystifying. And indeed, while his economic his-
tories are considered definitive, his communication works appear incomplete—more of an inspiration and a challenge than a body of coherent work. Innis’ ideas about communication in its relation to culture, society, and world order are supposed to emerge somehow, from surveys of communication in history, and lots of it. His texts are essentially a parade of historical experiences in their relation to media, marched past repeatedly in lectures, articles, and monographs about communication. This recurring historical review usually proceeds along a chronological axis, although lapses and errors occur quite frequently. Innis, as if viewing the parade from a grandstand, occasionally seizes on a fact or a relationship to make an editorial point.3

Readers of these surveys, patterned as historical play-by-play interlaced with expert analysis, are engaged by a problem of coherence on at least two levels. First they encounter the problem of contradictions and inconsistencies, which emerge from a close reading of the texts. Seeking a dialectic that would clarify them, readers are challenged by the more general problem of the chaotic nature of Innis’ comments, observations, and arguments—their tendency to go “backwards and forward and sideways all at the same time.” Readers must ask whether a real theory or even a consistent point of view may be found in these texts, whether there really is a demiurge somewhere. Readers soon discover that they themselves must take that role and provide coherence to the author’s elusive inconclusiveness. Not many students of communication in contemporary society were open to this journey into history and to the edge of chaos.

Nevertheless, over the past half century a series of perceptive scholars have responded to the challenge of deciphering Innis, systematizing his observations, and crystallizing a coherent theory from them. This hermeneutic process has yielded an intriguing body of theory, but, it has also worked to regulate Innis’ dizzying openness and freeze his thinking into a comfortably closed and unambiguous mould. This article represents an updated chapter in the cumulative project of domesticating Innis. It attempts to briefly characterize the received wisdom concerning the meaning of his communication texts and theorems and then reviews aspects of it on two parallel paths. One cross-checks the abstract of Innis’ work as it has been canonized in communication studies against the genuine item. The other seeks the sources of Innis’ approach, by tracing the origins and the development of his thinking about communications. This revisiting of Innis’ texts and their development inevitably reflects contemporary experiences and concerns. It highlights the historicist dimension of Innis’ project, using it to point out the relevance of his approach toward an interpretation of our contemporary media dynamic. This essay does not attempt to draw any lessons for today, but underscores elements of Innis’ heritage, which may prove useful in understanding our own communications environment.

The accepted Innis
In contrast to the contradictory and open-ended nature of the original, the conventional sketch of Innis available to students of communication theory is refreshingly coherent and includes a number of consensual components.4 The first
concerns Innis’ methodological approach and points out the fundamental histori-
cricity of his scholarship and theory. His ideas about communication, it is acknowl-
ledged, emerge from, and are sustained by, the study of the history of
communication and of communication in history. Thus, Joshua Meyrowitz, in his
influential use of the term “medium theory,” suggests that Innis, together with
McLuhan, “stand alone in terms of the breadth of history and culture they intend
to include within their frameworks.” But as Meyrowitz notes, history not only
informs Innis’ framework, it is also informed by it; he “rewrites human history as
the history of communication technologies” (1994, p. 52). Similarly, Stephen W.
Littlejohn in Theories of Mass Communication saw The Bias of Communication
and Empire and Communications as an attempt “to trace the influence of commu-
nication throughout the ages.” In fact, Innis’ work was “primarily historical and
artistic” (1978, pp. 344, 348).

Mass Communication Research, edited by Davison and Yu, also highlights
Innis’ essential historicism. While contemporary historians question its rigor,
Davison & Yu commend Innis’ history as “an excellent start in the direction of
providing solid economic and social histories of cultural change as influenced by
information technology” (1974, p. 174). Nevertheless, and quite appropriately for
a volume subtitled Major Issues and Future Directions, it is acknowledged that
Innis’ foray into history was to some extent a dead end, pointing to no future direc-
tion; it “did not lead to a generation of scholars continuing the tradition of eco-
nomic and social history that he had begun” (1974, p. 174). Indeed, not much is
made of this historicism, either in analyses of Innis in the communication studies
tradition or in intellectual histories of the evolution of thinking about communica-
tion in his times.

A second element of the accepted Innis is his focus on the medium—a tech-
nological artifact—in analyzing processes of communication and their social sig-
nificance. It is widely accepted that for Innis, communication technology, to an
important extent, drives history. In this view, the particular technological
attributes of a medium or a mix of media prevalent in a given society condition the
practice of communication in that society, the institutions and sociocultural
arrangements associated with those practices, and through them more general
societal arrangements and cultural climates.

Given the emphasis on the role of media in determining the institutions and
systems of social organization, the label of technological determinism is com-
monly applied to Innis’ approach. Thus, in the influential Handbook of Commu-
nication Wilbur Schramm states flatly that “Innis and McLuhan are technological
determinists” (Pool, 1973, p. 124). A generation later Denis McQuail, in an
equally influential text, was just as clear-cut: “The most complete and influential
variant of media determinism is probably that of the Canadian economic historian,
Harold Innis,” he avers, explaining that “Innis attributed the characteristic fea-
tures of successive civilizations to the prevailing and dominant modes of commu-
nication” (1994, pp. 97-98).® A recent college text introducing students to the
problematics of communication technology went as far as attributing Innis’ fame
to his having “developed ideas in the field of technological determinism” (Ramot, 1996, p. 193).

These and numerous other accounts constructing Innis’ approach to communications as technology-driven can point to no less an authoritative reference than Marshall McLuhan. In introducing The Bias of Communication—an introduction toned as a ceremonial induction of Innis into a communication theory hall of fame—McLuhan proclaimed both technological determinism and historicism as cornerstones of his senior colleague’s legacy. McLuhan managed to deliver this message in a single sentence: Innis, he wrote, “had discovered a means of using historical situations as a lab in which to test the character of technology in the shaping of cultures” (1951, p. xi).5

A third element of the accepted Innis, and one of the most broadly applied, is his notion of monopoly of knowledge. By transplanting the economic concept of monopoly to the field of communications—to knowledge artifacts and skills—Innis elegantly buttressed his media determinism. When certain media or their knowledge products dominate society’s communication environment, the peculiar dynamics of oligopoly amplify and perpetuate the dominance of those media and the bodies of knowledge associated with them. Such a monopoly blocks the emergence of alternatives and ultimately enhances the effects of the privileged medium and knowledge skills on society and on its political, social, and cultural profile.

In presenting this element of the accepted Innis, standard communication texts vary in emphasis. Some highlight the direct economic and sociopolitical implications of monopoly of knowledge, others point to more general political economy implications, still others to the epistemological consequences of monopoly of knowledge. Thus, in a Web page oriented to students, Marshall Soules pointed out that “Innis extended the economic concept of monopoly to include culture and politics.” Soules delineates varied sources of such potential monopoly power, ranging from control over relevant raw material and capital for its purchase to mastery of complex knowledge bases. Meyrowitz similarly suggested that Innis “adapts the principles of economic monopolies to the study of information monopolies. He argues that one way in which social and political power is wielded is through control over communication media” (1994, p. 51). On the political economy level of analysis, John O’Neill maintains that Innis “read the history of the great empires as … pivoted upon the staples of communication on papyrus, clay and stone, in print [et cetera].” More generally O’Neill suggests that Innis conflated the material history of world power struggles with “the communicative struggle over monopolies of knowledge” (1991, pp. 137-138). Other accounts, such as Ellis’ in Crafting Society (1999) or Casmir’s in Building Communication Theories (1994), emphasize the intellectual, mental, and spiritual consequences of hegemonic control over knowledge. To them monopoly meant the sway of authoritative epistemologies, “the limitations imposed on the spirit by technology exercised by authority.” Such a monopoly could only be broken by new media “that allowed the human spirit to break out along the outer fringes of authority” (Casmir, 1994, p. 233; cf. Boyd-Barrett, 1995, p. 498).
Finally, communication scholars aver that Innis proposed an extremely effective criterion for organizing and analyzing the plethora of communication media which bowed in and out in the course of history, affecting communication systems, societies, and their cultures in the process. This criterion is the time-space divide as applied to the performance of media and their underlying technologies. In this view, some media are more effective in delivering knowledge over time—from past to present and from present to future. Other media are more effective in delivering knowledge across space. On this central point, communication textbooks and syntheses are practically uniform, most probably because Innis himself is unusually clear about this. On page one, paragraph one of “The Bias of Communication,” he suggests that any medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time… According to its characteristics [it] may be better suited to the dissemination of knowledge over time than over space, particularly if the medium is heavy and durable and not suited to transportation [e.g., tablets, pyramids], or to the dissemination of knowledge over space than over time, particularly if the medium is light and easily transported [e.g., papyri, electrons]. (1951, p. 33)

The divergence of orality and literacy serves as the fundamental model, as well as the historical origin, of the time-media/space-media polarity.

The proposition that individual media, and ultimately media-mixes, diverge on a time-space axis has been solidly entrenched in the canonized version of Innis. Following Innis’ lead, subsequent scholars crystallized elaborate series of variables determining the overall profile of societies: political, economic, religious, legal, administrative, managerial—one could go on and on—that parallel the time-space polarity. These variables intersect into exquisite sets of coherent overall portraits of societies and their biases, as determined by the media they employ. Not least among the factors converging into the conflicting time and space sets were the nature of knowledge and of knowing, even states of consciousness.

There is a considerable consensus among communication scholars on the validity and usefulness of this basic observation. In fact, there appears to be only one conspicuous dissenting voice, which challenges the relation of durable media to a time bias and ephemeral media to a space bias. In discussing the metabolé of the old kingdom in Egypt into the middle kingdom, this scholar states: “A decline of centralized bureaucratic power and a shift from an emphasis on control over space reflected in the pyramid to a decentralized bureaucratic power with an emphasis on continuity and religion [namely time] to be seen in the spread of writing and the use of papyrus … weakened control over space…” This argument appears to turn on its head Innis’ proposition that durable media such as the pyramids imply an accent on time, whereas easily transportable, short-lived media such as papyri are to be associated with a society biased toward space. This proposition, contradicting Innis, was made by no other than Innis himself, in “The Problem of Space” (1951, p. 95).
In trying to reconcile these two contradictory statements, it may be wise to first consider a preliminary, and much more fundamental, challenge to Innis’ time- and space-media theorem. The source of the problem is the nature of orality itself. As noted, a central insight Innis had developed concerned the social implications of orality as opposed to script. This idea was conspicuously presented in “The Bias of Communication,” traceable throughout Empire and Communications, and elaborated on in “Minerva’s Owl” and in “A Plea for Time” (Innis, 1950). Orality, according to Innis, is not space binding but time binding. Now, the space side of the equation appears to work well enough. After all, there are severe physical limitations with regard to the reach of the human voice in space. In addition, the corruption of oral knowledge as it is relayed from person to person and from place to place makes orality a poor medium for binding space. However, orality’s ineffectiveness in binding space does not necessarily yield a fit between the oral medium and time, namely, with the durability of messages. The opposite would appear to be the case: the oral medium is anything but heavy, resilient, and durable as are pyramids, stellae, or clay tablets; it is effervescent and ephemeral. Innis, however, clearly considered orality to be the model, the cornerstone, of time-biased communications.

The solution to this theoretical non sequitur would appear to be built into human adjustment to the peculiar limitations of the medium. Given the fleeting nature of oral knowledge, it can be preserved only through digesting, internalizing, and repeating the message time and again, to oneself but more effectively to others. Thus, if orally transmitted knowledge is to exist at all, it must be received from a predecessor, internalized, and made part of living consciousness. It is in this sense that orality is time binding. It leads to a concern with preserving knowledge from the past, demands continuity, and requires the keeping of that knowledge, and through it the past, alive. For the past to exist in an environment lacking durable media, it must exist through continuity, and as living knowledge it binds the present to the past. Thus, precisely the limitations on the durability of oral knowledge bind and bias an oral society to its past.

The conflict between the Innis of “The Bias” and the Innis of “The Problem of Space” can be resolved quite simply by applying this dialectic module. In line with the structure of orality’s time-binding dynamic, Innis is telling us that if a sociopolitical system is shaped to be effective in its control over, say, space, its problem becomes time; it is threatened by discontinuity. Once it becomes conscious of and concerned about this deficiency and its dangers, it will invest considerable efforts to generate time-binding media. It will develop a concern or a bias toward time. And by the same token, a sociocultural system with effective time-binding media in place may naturally become concerned about its space-binding powers and necessarily focus on them. More generally, a bias, if recognized, will generate a counter bias as a corrective, in the cause of equilibrium.

Innis presented this dynamic of inverted determinism most simply and straightforwardly in The Bias of Communication, one page after having pointed out the basic polarity in the media of time and media of space (quoted above). In
describing the rise of the early monarchy in Egypt he suggests that the “success of the monarchy in acquiring control over Egypt in terms of space necessitated a concern with the problem of continuity or time.” This concern translated into mummification and the construction of the pyramids “as a device for emphasizing control over time” (Innis, 1951, p. 34). Similarly, after recovering from the Hyksos occupation in the middle of the second millennium B.C. and building an empire over a vast expanse, it was precisely the “solution to the problem of space” that “compelled the king to attempt a solution of problems of continuity” (1951, p. 35).

It is in the context of this inverted-determinism dialectic that Innis’ notion of monopoly of knowledge assumes its greatest significance. As noted, media is essentially a technological apparatus, which provides for the interface of mind and matter—a technical resource that sustains the life world of ideas. Through achieving a monopolistic position, a certain communication apparatus may come to dominate the physical infrastructure for communications and thus determine the nature and the spread of knowledge. This monopoly of matter, however, since it serves the mind, can perpetuate and fixate not only itself but also the interests and concerns of society, shaping them in its own image. The dynamics of oligopoly operate even more directly when, beyond the technical resources that sustain it, knowledge itself is monopolized. And all the more so when the party hegemonizing this knowledge is compact and effectively organized. Either way, the most dangerous aspect of monopoly of knowledge is in barring mental and ideological change. By virtue of their uncontested power, monopolies of knowledge may blind individuals and societies even to the mere fact of imbalance between time and space media, let alone to its dangers and to the feasibility of alternatives. The consequent fixation on either trajectory—that of time or that of space—precludes correction and readjustment. It makes the inverted-deterministic thrust toward balance impossible.

The far-reaching implication of monopoly on the dynamic play of determinism and counter-determinism may be illustrated by applying it to the case of the modern state. Like empires—Innis’ basic unit of analysis—the now beleaguered entity of the state depends on a balance of time- and space-binding powers. After all, the state is founded on a mix of time and space orientations. On the one hand it is a creature of space—it is defined territorially and manages numerous scattered individuals and communities, networking them into a coherent entity. On the other hand, the state is the creature of time: its self-defining rationale is founded on genealogy, history, and memory. Ideally for the state, the play of determinism and inverted determinism would balance the conflicting orientations of time and space and ensure stability. The common roots in time, according to Innis, would lead to efforts toward the development of space-binding communications. The state’s territorial coherence would direct it to develop media for time binding. The negotiation of these opposites would yield balance and stability.

However, should the options for developing either of these thrusts close down, should either time or space monopolize society’s concerns, the state would
become seriously threatened. The shaky condition of the contemporary state demonstrates the danger of either kind of monopoly. When the former Yugoslavia relented its efforts to bind its space, a monopoly of genealogy and history inevitably prevailed, shattering its territorial coherence into hostile and ultimately warring, historically defined ethnic and religious entities. Should countries in Western Europe, weary of centuries of the tyranny of time, relent on their efforts to keep the past alive and focus instead on markets and amusements—essentially, on space—time will be forgotten. Space would begin to unify vast territories, on a continental scale, as regards their economy, currency, and bureaucracy, leading to a NATO, and EC, and ultimately a European Union. Thus, either imbalance, let alone both, leaves the state dwarfed and doomed to irrelevance.

Canada would also face significant challenges should either time or space monopolize its concerns. Canada represents a mirror image of the “normal” national state. Given its vast and fragmented expanse, it is a country divided by a common geography. Given its relative newness and demographic heterogeneity, its unity is threatened rather than sustained by memory and history. Canada’s coherence is therefore contingent on purposefully and actively cultivating both time and space orientations. To survive as a nation-state, Canada must develop space-binding media, such as the transcontinental railroad written into its constitution, and also actively develop its own culture and traditions, rather than have that option frozen into an American and a British monopoly of knowledge. A failure on either account would compromise both Canadian nationalism and Canada’s geographical integrity.9

Yet if this understanding of Innis’ theory of dynamic equilibrium of time and space concerns is valid, it undermines perhaps the most prevalent assumption about his approach as recounted above—his being a technological determinist. Possibly a straw man, a technological deterministic approach is usually construed to include three elements. First, that technology, as the bastard offspring of pure science (understood as the source of novel ideas presumably developed independently of social expectations), is an autonomous force. Further, that given social equilibrium, technology is the primary source of change in the human condition. Finally, that given social equilibrium, changes effected by new technology are prone to have major effects that reverberate throughout society and transform it.10

Innis himself appears to claim the questionable distinction of being a technological determinist. “A medium of communication,” he writes, “has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge … and it becomes necessary to study its characteristics in order to appraise its influence in its cultural setting” (1951, p. 33). Such a study of the characteristics of a technological medium may indeed yield dramatic results:

The use of a medium of communication over a long period will to some extent determine the character of knowledge to be communicated and suggest that its pervasive influence will eventually create a civilization in which life and flexibility will become exceedingly difficult to maintain and that the advantages of a new medium will become such as to lead to the emergence of a new civilization. (1951, p. 34)
The character of this new civilization, in turn, would also be determined by the new media it adopts, and so turns the wheel.

Inverted determinism, however, could prevent such a sorry state of affairs, and also redeem Innis from the onus of being a technological determinist. Since Innis maintains that societies are capable of balancing their time-space act through appropriating communication technologies that would counter the monopolizing tendencies of entrenched media, he is not much of a technological determinist. Rather, he emerges as a through and through social constructivist, holding that technological change is engineered and affected by society’s strategies and choices. It is society that decides how much literacy it wants to mix into its orality, whether it prefers Xerox machines or Pravdas, satellite feeds of Seinfeld or sermons preached in a local mosque, synagogue, or church. Media determinism, as disinfected by the prospect of inverted determinism (i.e., purposeful social choices), posits that the social dog wags its technological tail rather than being wagged by it.

Nor is communication technology, however introduced into society, the primary source of change for Innis. In the parade of historical data that he repeats over and over again in his communication texts, the sources and origins of social change vary considerably. It could be the pattern of the Nile’s flooding, foreign invasion, military victory or defeat, the invention of new gods, and new ideas, and other novelties that both reflect and affect change in societies. Technology as the source of social change is the exception, not the rule, in Innis’ recounting of human history.

In only one feature of Innis’ portrayal of the dynamics of change can one hear an echo of technological determinism. As noted, a technological deterministic approach expects the introduction of new technologies into a homeostatic society to yield effects of the greatest magnitude. For even if it is society that drives technology, even if technology is deployed to react to change that was enacted by other factors, once selected and deployed by society, communication technologies may be expected to have very powerful implications. Since they touch on the nexus of mind and matter, those new technologies are of the greatest consequence. In this respect at least, Innis would fit the bill of a communication-technology determinist.

But there is a nuance to be noticed at this point, a mere matter of emphasis carrying major significance. When Innis presents human history, he pays considerable attention to communication technologies. Moreover, he does point out the revolutionary transformations these technologies wrought, even if only as agents and not the primal source of change. However, in discussing change effected by communication technology, Innis emphatically places the accent on the communication, not the technology, side of the compound. In other words, Innis was a communication determinist. He considered processes of communication and the institutions associated with them to have tremendous effects on the nature of societies and cultures, and on the course of their history.
What determines what?
In looking back at Innis’ communication scholarship after 50 years, communication determinism emerges as its towering revelation. Innis uncovered “the significance of communication”—the fact that civilizations are “profoundly influenced by communication and that marked changes in communication have had important implications” (1951, p. 3). Innis, the economic historian, found that communication, rather than money, makes the world go round. And since Innis believed that communication history was the key to world history, he went on to read the history of the world as a history of communication, just as formerly, he wrote the national history of Canada as a history of political economy. Thus, his great revelation in communication theory was suggesting that there should be such a thing; his revolution as a communication theorist was being one. Upon embarking on his exploration into communications, Innis assembled a comprehensive and imposing bibliography of some 2,000 potentially relevant titles. Exercising his fabled work ethic, the former Ontario farm boy managed to consume and digest them. A generous selection from that formidable bibliography found its way, in the form of quotations and references, into the essays comprising The Bias of Communication. Not a single one of the works cited therein includes the word “communication” or “media” in its title or subtitle. Innis’ work was revolutionary in discovering and isolating communications as an aspect of history and further positing its development as a key to unlocking the vicissitudes of mind, matter, and their interface.

Given the bias of social and academic life in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Innis’ revelation of the “significance of communication” may appear commonplace. As communication developed into a legitimate field of academic inquiry, featuring university departments and professional associations, scholarly periodicals and textbooks, thinking about communication as a distinct aspect of the social experience, let alone as a key to understanding other aspects, realized itself and to an extent depleted itself. Moreover, and as noted above, the characteristic rhetoric of the past generation celebrated a “communication revolution” that was supposed to usher in a new era—a “digital age” and an “information society.” Inevitably, the professional bias of contemporary communication scholars and the bias of the period they live in tended to make Innis’ discovery a trivial truism rather than a breakthrough.

Innis presented his discovery in the beginning of The Bias of Communication. However confusing his essays could become, he usually opened them by succinctly exposing their purpose as part of an overall agenda. The Bias of Communication, originally presented as a paper at the University of Michigan in 1949, was no exception. In its opening paragraph Innis’ cause was put in the form of a proposition:

The appearance of a wide range of cultural phenomena at different periods in the history of Western civilization has been described by Professor A. L. Kroeber in Configuration of Cultural Growth. He makes comments at various points to explain the relative strength or weakness of cultural elements, but refrains from extended discussion. I do not propose to do more than add a foot-
note to these comments and in this to discuss the possible *significance of communication* [italics added] to the rise and decline of cultural traits. [(1951, p. 33)]

It is indeed in relation to Kroeber’s argument (1944) that the revolutionary nature of Innis’ proposition emerges. Kroeber, like other prominent scholars of the twentieth century’s era of the world wars, focused on civilizations as his unit of analysis (see Sanderson, 1995). Kroeber’s project was to first establish, then account for, the pattern of simultaneous, rapid advances in the major branches of cultural endeavour in the course of the rise of civilizations. He categorized the key branches of cultural development as philosophy, science, literature, fine arts, and the performing arts. Innis, in humbly “adding a footnote” to Kroeber’s project, was proposing much more than adding communication as the sixth item on the list of cultural traits, alongside science, philosophy, and their likes. He was proposing communication as a meta-category, which would not only co-change as part of the pattern of acceleration in cultural development, but be a factor that determined the entire process.14

When he aligned himself with Kroeber, Innis was doing more than economizing on scholarly energy. By taking a ride on this giant’s shoulders, he was also indicating a dramatic shift in his outlook and method, even in his scholarly identity. Kroeber in his *Configurations* was venturing into history from anthropology, expecting that history might validate his grand hypothesis about the structures of cultural development. Innis found himself in the same methodological juncture as Kroeber, but he had reached it by taking the opposite tack—from history to general theory. In taking this path Innis was apparently acting on his notion of a Hegelian idea. Hegel differentiated a number of levels of historical inquiry, and the first was the “original” history of the primary source, representing history as a present. Then came “reflective” history, which represents attempts by later historians to record and make sense of the past (inevitably in terms of their own experiences). The final and ultimate level of historical inquiry was “philosophical history,” an interpretation of history yielding a general understanding of human development. Philosophical history, according to Hegel, uses the findings of reflective histories in its quest for a general understanding of the world. Most importantly, Hegel considers *longue durée* histories of specific aspects of the human experience such as art or religion, which take a “universal point of view,” to be a bridge between reflective and philosophical history.15 Innis, in moving from Canadian economic history to the ecumenical study of communication, was consciously crossing over from the reflective to the philosophical, from history to theory.

Innis’ redefinition of himself as a philosopher of history has important implications in understanding his legacy. Not least among them, it can explain the textual peculiarities of his communication scholarship. One such oddity was the radical and otherwise inexplicable shift in the sources he used, from primary materials when studying Canadian economic history to the practically exclusive use of secondary sources in his studies of communication. Since Hegel taught that
the universal history of a single field—such as communication—is philosophical history, and since he prescribed reflective histories as the material for writing philosophical history, Innis’ change of methodology is accounted for. More generally, the particular mode of presentation characteristic of Innis’ communication studies, described above as a historic play-by-play interlaced with analytic comments, reflects a self-conscious adaptation of form and structure to the rationale of philosophical history. Facts of history are marched chronologically, one by one, and Innis, the philosopher in the grandstand, contributes comments on them as they relate to his philosophical focus: the determining influence of communication on society and culture.

Similarly, Innis’ self-perception as a philosopher of history puts a new face on the problem of internal contradictions in his work: the source of contradictions as well as their toleration. Many explicit contradictions in and between his essays, even the systematic ones in Empire and Communications, reflect disagreements between Innis’ sources. Having abandoned reflective history, it was no longer his task to establish an accurate historical record and ascertain the facts. Conflicts could only be documented and acknowledged, not resolved. Moreover, both sides to the contradiction were just as pertinent to his main thrust, since either and all possibilities ultimately demonstrated the “significance of communication.” On points of interpretation, too, the new Innis could afford great leeway: his varying, even conflicting interpretations of the consequences of communication technologies were essentially equivalent, since his purpose was to demonstrate that they did indeed have effects, and highly significant ones.

The origins of Innis’ discovery

The origins of Innis’ discovery and the process through which he came to realize the “significance of communication” to human development are surprisingly vague. One way of approaching the problem is through a close scrutiny of the internal evolution of Innis’ works, tracing the theme of communication within them. This approach assumes that Innis developed his revolutionary perspective independently, through a complex process of intellectual growth. An alternative approach is to scan the intellectual horizon of his times, seeking external influences. In such a canvass, a particular focus on a southern vista, from Toronto to Chicago and its university, is particularly promising. The ferment in social thinking at the University of Chicago of Innis’ time, and the interest of its luminaries in problems of communication, points to Chicago as a potential shaping influence. Innis was affiliated with the University of Chicago, first as student then as a prospective teacher, making a Chicago connection particularly plausible.

In pursuing the first approach, which posits a self-discovery, the question of continuity from the early Innis of Canadian staples to the later Innis of world communications becomes important.16 The radical shift in the nature of his research on moving from economic history to communication history—his move from history proper to philosophy of history—would appear to support the notion of discontinuity. Yet the fundamental hypothesis of Innis’ philosophy of history—“the significance of communication”—appears to span both phases of his schol-
Early career, representing a stable core. The inverted-determinism dialectic may present itself as a key to bridging these two phases of Innis’ scholarship.

Communication was on Innis’ mind from the earliest stages of his scholarly career. His first major work, a reflective history of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), was essentially a study of a medium of communication in a particular time and place. A two-volume critical sourcebook of documents in Canadian economic history, which Innis prepared together with A. R. M. Lower, is particularly revealing of this early focus on communications (1929-1933). The first volume of the sourcebook, which was mainly Lower’s production, treats communication issues sparingly and sporadically. The second volume, which was mainly Innis’ contribution, was divided into four sections, each covering a region of Canada. In each of these sections the first and most substantial subsection was devoted to “Transportation and Communication.” Clearly Innis recognized the significance of communication, in this case as a key to economic history, from early on.

The place of the communication theme in Innis’ staple studies is less obvious, but at least as important. In one of its broader meanings, the staple theory represented a critical response to Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis. This is made clear in the concluding chapter of *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1930), which serves as an analytical conspectus of the work as a whole. Though Turner’s name is not mentioned, Innis was directly responding to his frontier thesis and challenging it. Turner, in asserting American exceptionalism, maintained that a unique aspect of its historical geography had a determining influence on individual mentalité, on social institutions, and on national culture. In his view the physical distance of North American settlers from their European origins, later the distance of frontiersmen from centres of North American population, made for the decay of old country, later eastern American, conventions. Moreover, the transformative experience of living in a wilderness world of nature beyond the frontiers of established society produced a characteristic new-world outlook and new institutions. They merged into a fresh culture bred of coping with the challenges of the wilderness. New ideas and institutions, as developed on the frontier, then radiated back to the established centres of North American society, transforming them too in the process. In this way, the frontier, a fact of space, had a major transformative influence in the dimension of time. It made for dramatic discontinuities in the received, traditional heritage of individual, community, and society.

Innis proposed a reverse perspective on the frontier experience and its implications for the connectedness of East and West, Europe and North America, past and present. Rather than how the frontier shaped Europeans, Innis was more impressed by how European, and later eastern American, institutions shaped a response when challenged by the frontier. Through his detailed studies of geography, transportation, business arrangements, and economic enterprise he was finding that distance and isolation—potential wedges of discontinuity and separation—generated a reactive response tending toward continuity and connectedness. The challenge space posed to time—namely to tradition and social connections—generated the mobilization of traditional institutions for extending
their binding force over space. By creating effective means of transportation and communication, a veteran mercantilist system could expand westward, from Europe over the Atlantic and on across the new continent all the way to the Pacific. The potentially deterministic influence of the frontier generated a response, which was the imperial staple economy.

This interpretation of the significance of the frontier amounted to a theory about communications, social and economic organization, and determinism. It was society’s will to extend itself across space that ultimately determined the implications the frontier would have. This social desire to overcome space was realized through the establishment of a grand space-binding economic and social system, founded on powerful means of transportation and communication. In this inverted-deterministic perspective, Canadian nationalism emerged as a centripetal response to the centrifugal challenge posed by tremendous geographical expanse and the physical barriers within it. Its core was a coherent system of communication and transportation. Innis’ direct and unequivocal response to Turner’s revolutionary 1897 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1897/1966), was “the significance of communication” in North American history. Ultimately he came to believe that the significance of communication transcended the Atlantic theatre and the eras of transatlantic migration and settlement. He found it was a key to all of history. Innis’ communication studies can thus be seen as a radical extension of his North American economic and institutional history.

According to the foregoing, Innis had a bias of communication from the commencement of his research into Canadian economic history. He acted on it through tracing the role communication and transportation played in shaping economic development in Canada, in its relation to the broader Atlantic theatre of economic institutions. This outlook later broadened in space and in time to become an ecumenical panorama of institutions as creatures of communication, yielding a unique and original theory of the role of communication in the development of civilizations. This paradigm, the understanding of historical development as anchored in changing processes of communication, was thus very much Innis’ own. It was the product of a career-long investigation into the communicative flow of goods and ideas.

But this casting of Innis’ scholarly development does not preclude a role for external influences. For if an interest in communication was a stable core in his intellectual career, a preliminary orientation in that direction is certainly reasonable; and, a probable source was the Chicago School. Prior to Innis’ discovery of communication determinism, John Dewey and Robert Park, Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley had developed a body of theory that considered processes of communication a central instrument of social organization. “The Significance of Communication,” a short programmatic essay by Cooley (1998), predated and prephrased Innis’ proposition that communication was the ultimate key to understanding social and cultural development.

Authorities on Innis differ in evaluating the influence of these Chicago predecessors on his thinking and scholarship. While McLuhan thought of Innis’ work
as an extension of the Chicago tradition, and went as far as considering Innis “the most eminent of the Chicago group headed by Robert Park,” James Carey found only a limited carry-over from Chicago to Toronto. Other scholars have taken intermediate positions between the poles of a dominant and a marginal Chicago influence (Carey, 1992; Crowley, 1982; McLuhan, 1951; Neill, 1972; Stamps, 1995). The evidence as to direct contact between Innis and the Chicago masters is limited and not very revealing. Innis pursued his doctoral studies at Chicago at the same time Cooley and Park, Dewey, Mead and Mills were most active in developing their thinking about communication. However, Innis’ transcripts demonstrate that he did not study with any of them. Moreover, the bibliography to his Chicago dissertation on the Canadian Pacific Railway does not include Cooley’s seminal works on American railroads, nor did I notice a direct reference by Innis to other writings by the Chicago group about communication. It may well be, however, that just as in the case of his dialogue with Turner and his thesis, Innis only referenced works he used as his authorities—those which provided him with facts or ideas that sustained his own arguments. He may have not cited works that did not serve as foundations for his own arguments, let alone works he disagreed with.

In the case of Cooley’s thinking about the significance of communication, the disagreement is patent enough. It is underscored by precisely the high degree of correspondence between their perspectives. Cooley had an expansive grasp of communication. He thought it to include all expressions of, and exposure to, human meaning. As such it was the cause and effect of human consciousness. He too found media significant; after all, meaning—the cause and effect of consciousness—was channelled by media. Cooley had offered an illustration for this relation of media and human consciousness: one could get at mental processes by studying the communication environment “just as one who wishes to grasp the organic character of industry and commerce might well begin with the study of the railway system and of the amount and kind of commodities it carries, proceeding thence to the more abstract transactions of finance” (1998, p. 102). Cooley’s allegorical move from communication to economics was precisely the road Innis took, albeit in the opposite direction, in his scholarly evolution from economics to communication. Indeed, both Cooley—son of an eminent railroad scholar—and Innis had studied the railroad as a key to understanding North American economic development. Furthermore, Cooley had identified four fundamental factors determining the nature of processes of communication, and they highlighted the dimensions of time and space. They included, besides expressiveness, permanence—“the overcoming of time”; swiftness—“the overcoming of space”; and diffusion—a space-oriented measure of the size of the audience. Here, then, were time and space as fundamental variables of the communication matrix.

At this juncture, with both scholars understanding communications as bridges in time and space, their paths parted. Cooley was locked on the idea of progress as a sweeping, inevitable course of human history; he considered it an accelerated conquest of human happiness evolving in time and spreading in space.
This was also the course of the evolution of communication: no contradiction hindered the parallel, onward march of “swiftness,” “diffusion,” and “permanence,” and indeed, he found no fault with the globalizing, unifying thrust of communication over space. Even had Cooley understood that there was a trade-off between space and time, it probably would not have dampened his enthusiasm about the advent of powerful, rapid, media of space: progress, in its future-orientedness, had nothing to gain from time—from memory, continuity, and history.

Innis disagreed sharply. He found that the expanding reach and accelerating swiftness of media came at the expense of “permanence” and, ultimately, of stability. Given the trade-off between time and space media, unbalanced progress was inevitably regressive. Most generally, Innis didn’t buy into the Whig interpretation of human history and the utopian world anticipated by the idealist progressives. His historicism compelled him to consider the decline and fall of civilizations as well as their rise while his pessimistic side considered potential dangers in the evolution of media, not only the promise. His credo was balance rather than progress, and his agenda its deliberate restoration. In opposition to Chicago’s future-orientedness, Innis proposed an orientation toward historical consciousness, tradition, and memory. Thus, his analysis of communication and social and political organization evolved along the same lines, but reached conclusions that were diametrically opposed to those of Chicago’s enthusiastic progressives. To the extent that he was a disciple of Chicago’s communication-minded scholars, he was an apostate, a new light spreading a new and revolutionary message. He preached the gospel of history and time, of looking back as a way of marching forward.

**Innis: Past, present, future**

Although conventional abstracts of Innis’ communication theory duly acknowledge the fundamental historicity of his approach, its implications have not been meaningfully followed up. Innis’ historicity had two complementary planks: one based a philosophy, or theory, of communication on historical evidence, using history as the great laboratory for generating and testing ideas about communication. The other understood communication as a key to interpreting history. Neither of these prospects generated much methodological interest or practical emulation.

Yet historicity may ultimately represent one of Innis’ most useful and inspiring messages. As historians have become more aware of communication as a significant factor in their own lives, communication has become a topical focus of an ever-increasing number of responsible specialized studies, based on primary sources. This research, over the past two decades, is yielding a body of work that may effectively be applied to writing ecumenical histories of communication. Further, these writings may serve as a sound basis for generating and testing theory in communication. Communication theory, in turn, is no longer as crude and as speculative as when Innis and his contemporaries were making their first steps in establishing it. It can conceivably serve to orient historical research and ultimately provide for a better understanding of human history.21 These prospects for serious studies of the history of communication and of communication in history are
emerging just as academia is entering on a post-interdisciplinary thrust, razing walls separating disciplines rather than providing bridges for crossing them, as in its interdisciplinary phase. Innis’ pioneering effort in this vein may yet serve as an inspiration and as a model for such a project.

But there is even more to gain from a revival of Innis’ historicism. As noted, few if any observers resort to his ideas or make reference to his texts in attempting to interpret the rapid and radical changes in our contemporary communication environment. It is precisely the neglect of the historical dimension of Innis’ work —its orientation to the past—that accounts for its only limited usefulness in grappling with the present and future. History, after all, is the study of change, and Innis, a historian, had methodically merged dynamic mechanisms with the structural and systemic thrust of his ideas. The play of determinism and inverted determinism was the central dynamic element of the approach, and as we have seen, it was downplayed or even eliminated in the process of streamlining the icon of Innis in communication theory.

Innis, the scholar, taught us that media delivered a message that society and individuals could and would answer. At best they would react to an overemphasis of time by deliberately and judiciously shifting their emphasis to space, and would highlight time if space was threatening to monopolize society’s horizon. Alternatively, peripheral players, not dominated by the monopolistic tendencies at society’s centre, would re-introduce the suppressed, opposite tendency. At worst, severely imbalanced entities would become dysfunctional and only a drastic correction, usually by unfriendly outside forces, would restore balance.

Innis the involved public man, academia leader, and policymaker observed, with foreboding, that what he labelled as a space bias seemed to be threatening his society’s well-being. He feared that monopoly was driving Canada, and Western civilization generally, into a dead end of infinite space. As noted, one of the most marked differences between his perspective and that of members of the Chicago School concerned the nature of progress. Innis emphatically declined his predecessors’ Whig interpretation of communication development, their belief that technical and institutional advances in communication inevitably made for improvements in social conditions. Innis saw no necessary relation between advances in the tools for communication and social betterment. Granted, more effective communications would have great effects, but they could be for the worse as likely as for the better. Temperamentally a pessimist, Innis feared the worst; he envisioned a space bias marching triumphantly on, bound ultimately to devastate Western society and culture. Having averred, time and again, that unbalanced development would generate a backlash, Innis sounded the alarm.

Not that Innis was sounding a false alarm. At the time he was thinking through the biases of media, Western society was indeed marching to the frontiers of space, space in the expansive, composite sense Innis had construed. In mid-century the Cold War was the stage on which two enormous empires played out their antagonistic game, supported by an ever-expanding cast of players merging into two globe-wide blocks. Experimental science was celebrating unparalleled
triumphs, grounding the military might of the superpowers, and the economic power of business enterprises was ballooning into global scope. As physical space was capturing imaginations that would ultimately launch man to the moon, an entertainment and culture industry was diverting minds, the world over, from complexity and dialectic and from concern with religion, tradition, and history, to a celebration of present-mindedness and consumerism. Giant corporate conglomerates footed the bill for the amusement extravaganza, realizing windfall profits in the process. Within a few decades there was only one empire—as Innis would have suspected, the American one—which was stretching its influence over the entire globe and setting a new political and economic order, imprinting the world with a common price and a common value system, to the beat of a globalizing amusement industry. Taken together, these processes were bringing about what one historian called “the end of history,” or as Innis would have put it, an end of time.

Innis the theorist would have expected a reaction to set in, a remedial resurgence of the time-set. Innis the pessimistic public man would have expected dangerous threats to his imbalanced, space-monopolized civilization by the conservators of time. And as we now know with the benefit of hindsight, both these visions materialized. The theoretical scenario of correction and also the political threat of aggressive challenge, from within as well as from without, began playing themselves out as the twentieth century drew to its close. Parallel to the globalization trend there emerged a rainbow of counter movements, in numerous places and of a variety of cultural expressions. Past-oriented loyalties flowered into a new emphasis on ethnic identity, multiculturalism, and multilingualism, accompanied by a revival of interest in religion and mysticism. All these stirrings underscored a revived concern with the time-set. Then, too, environmental consciousness and a new awareness of class implications of a global economy generated powerful anti-globalization sentiments embracing localism and communal coherence. In the world of ideas an inward-looking subjectivity came to hold the modernist notion of objective science irrelevant. In line with the emergence of these time-biased concerns, fundamentalism and tribalism began fragmenting and splintering political and administrative units to their bare and most fundamental elements in a quest oriented toward history and tradition.

Innis’ concerns over the state of world and Canadian politics, economics, and ideologies were inseparable from his analysis of the state of the media ecology, as structured by communication technologies. After all, he had discovered the “significance of communication” in the shaping of societies, cultures, and world order. And indeed, his pessimistic analysis of paralyzing imbalance was fully understandable when one considers the shape of the media environment of his times. Throughout his lifetime, media developed in a single direction—spacward. Following the script-print model, the new media of the first half of the twentieth century made it possible to engage ever more people, less intimately, and with greater authority. The telephone had been the last technological improvement applied to oral, dyadic, two-way communications, and it had arrived three
generations before Innis was writing about communication. Thereafter, the progress of media was the progress of scale, scope, and synchronicity, with fewer doing the talking, ever more listening, and no one questioning, answering, or talking back. First the mass-circulating national magazines and the grand newspaper chains emerged. Then wireless, originally a two-way medium, was converted to broadcast radio; and by the time Innis was writing his communications essays, television was rising to become a major fact of Western life. With the arrival of television the mix of available media had reached an unprecedented degree of imbalance on the time-space axis, tending decisively to the space pole. Single, uncontested messages were reaching unprecedented numbers of people, over an ever-expanding space, in real time. To invert McLuhan, the lecture superceded dialogue.

It was then that Innis sounded his alarm. His was the urgent message of the involved citizen combined with the wisdom of the theorist of inverted determinism, of correction and re-balance. And indeed, before long, as his theory predicted, the history of communications changed its course. On the heels of the steep upsurge in the space trajectory of media development, an opposite trajectory of media of time was emerging. Founded on the same powerful technologies, which served the twentieth century’s media of space, alternative media, which structurally paralleled the oral condition, were coming to the rescue. The audio-cassette and CD, VCR and Camcorder, Minitel and PC, voice mail and electronic mail, were working against breathless synchronicity. Technical improvements enabling a dramatic increase in bandwidth and channels for voice, video, and data transmission paved the way for narrowcasting, fragmenting in the process mass audiences into compact communities. Satellite-mediated videoconferences and computer-mediated discussion groups and chat rooms, even blueprints for interactive TV, emerged to counter the one-way plan of broadcast media. In short, just as the space-oriented thrust of media development was enabling a uniform global information environment, an opposite thrust was enhancing time-oriented communication plans. Innis would have been particularly amused by how possibly the most centralizing space-minded bureaucracy of modern society—the national security establishment—would invert the centralized, hierarchic structure of its communication network and seek a decentralized, non-hierarchic and periphery-focused medium of communications, which would mature into the Internet. This was an inverted-deterministic move if there ever was one.

In accord with Innis’ proposition, there appears to have been a significant link between the emergence of these new media and of the new social, political, and ideological movements. The new political forces that were not submerged in the onslaught of Western civilization’s radical orientation to space took hold of the new “little” and interactive media of time, countering the monopoly of space-oriented media within Western society and sustaining their time bias in the process. Essentialist and fundamentalist movements organized and stood up to the dominance of the leaders, financers, and prophets of global culture, economy, and polity. They were sustained in their resistance by opposite universes—one global-
ized, space biased, and served by big media, the other particularist, time based, and served by little media. The contest is threatening peace, prosperity, and the order of the third-millennium world. Half a century ago Harold Adams Innis had proposed that only the re-balancing of these opposite orientations within our communities, communications, and collective consciousness would ensure stability and promise human well-being.

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Notes
2. McLuhan himself described his own work as a “mere footnote” to Innis’; even more significantly, perhaps, McLuhan, who cultivated the image of a whimsical iconoclast, conceded that his outwardly conservative senior colleague was “the real freak” (introduction to The Bias of Communication, 1951, quoted in Marchand, 1989, p. 113).
3. This plan of composition is demonstrated most strikingly in Innis’ draft of History of Communication, a 1,000-page manuscript left among his papers: it represents an impressive, if disorganized, collection of fragments of historical information, from an eclectic array of sources, in a more or less chronological order. The manuscript is located in the Innis collection, University of Toronto Archives, Thomas Fisher Library, University of Toronto; it is also available in microform.
5. Arthur Kroker’s discussion of Innis’ emphasis on technology sidesteps the question of determinism and considers Innis’ focus on technology as an heuristic device (1984, pp. 87-122).
9. The numerous discussions of Canadian nationalism in its relation to communication have been strongly influenced by Karl Deutsch (1966). See, for example, Fortner (1979).
10. A variety of perspectives on the meaning of technological determinism and of social constructivism is available in Smith & Marx (1996).
11. William Westfall has suggested that Innis, always intrigued by theological questions, applied the tension between free will and God’s plan of history to the concept of bias. This present tension between determinism and inverted determinism would surely represent a tension congruent to the theological archetype (1981).
12. “There is good reason to regard Innis as the first writer to create a distinct field of inquiry using the social and economic consequence of developments in communication as subject matter” (Heyer, 1981, p. 250).
13. This bibliography, entered on index cards (on many of which Innis added notes), forms part of the Innis collection at the University of Toronto Archives, op cit.
In this context, “footnote” should be expansively construed as taking a further step, piggybacking on the validity of Kroeber’s findings and subsuming them. Innis employs a similar usage in the opening of *The Press: A Neglected Factor in the Economic History of the Twentieth Century*: “I am aware that I am only presenting a footnote on the work of Graham Wallace” (1949). There too, Innis’ footnote was a radical extension of Wallace’s work.

Hegelian ideas permeate Innis’ thinking and work. For a most expansive statement of Hegelian influences, particularly his language theory as received in Canada, see Stamps (1999). For other references to Innis’ incorporation of Hegelian models and concerns, see Theall (1981). See also Stamps, 1995, p. 68.

This issue is the subject of extensive debate. Creighton, in his “Innis: An Appraisal” (1981) as well as in *Harold Adams Innis: Portrait of a Scholar* (1957), presents perhaps the most extreme position of discontinuity. Interestingly, attempts at interpreting the shift in Innis’ work from staple economics to communications, such as the early convention that through his study of the Canadian wood and pulp industry as a staple feeding the U.S. production of finished knowledge goods Innis became interested in the political economy of the latter, in effect highlight the chasm between the two phases of his scholarly career (for example, Berger, 1976, and, to an extent, Pal, 1977, who emphasizes Innis’ thinking about scholarship and academia as the contingency for the shift between the two). One of the most insightful discussions of the shift, but also of the thematic links between the two phases, is Watson (1977). Neill, in *A new theory of value* (1972), provides a broad basis for the continuity perspective. Parker, in “Innis, Marx, and the Economics of Communication: A Theoretical Aspect of Canadian Political Economy” (1981), demonstrates the relevance of the staple studies to the political economy of communications, and in “Harold Innis: Staples, Communications, and the Economics of Capacity, Overhead Costs, Rigidity, and Bias” (1985), points out the implications of Innis’ findings in his communication studies to fundamental problems of economic theory.

James Carey has perceptively pointed out relations between Innis’ thinking on communication and Turner’s frontier thesis, most recently in: “Innis ‘in’ Chicago: Hope as the Sire of Discovery” (1999). See also Carey, 1981/1992, pp. 80-84, and his other discussions of Innis, note 7 above. An important recent discussion of Innis’ intellectual roots, highlighting both the Hegelian and the Scottish Common Sense Tradition, is provided by Judith Stamps (1999).

The literature on the frontier thesis is vast. Good introductions include Billington (1973), Bogue (1998), and the essays in Taylor (1972).

This theme may be traced to Innis’ study of the Canadian Pacific Railway. There, too, he might have been indirectly engaging Turner; see, for example, *A history of the Canadian Pacific Railway* (1971), p. 287.

For a short and authoritative summary of Cooley’s ideas, see Peters, 1999, pp. 184-188.

For an elaboration of these points see “‘Slender Bridges’ of Misunderstanding: The Social Legacy of Transatlantic Cable Communications” (Blondheim, 2004).

“Communicating a Counter Culture: Israeli Mainstream Media and Amnon Yitzhak Alternative Media Empire,” read at the 49th annual conference of the International Communication Association (ICA) and available upon request, includes a comprehensive bibliography documenting this process (Blondheim, 1999).

References


