Editorial

Public Matters

A critical theory of communication must affirm what is before our eyes and transcend it by imagining, at the very least, a world more desirable.

—James Carey, Communication as Culture

James Carey once wrote that “the major issues facing students of mass communication, the macro issues, concern the entire framework within which our studies proceed and therefore the nature, purpose and pertinence of the knowledge we profess” (1989b, p. 89). In acknowledging what is “before our eyes” and imagining “a world more desirable” (Carey, 1989a, p. 88), scholars must consider what issues are most relevant in any given place at any given time. They may also imagine that their work matters to a broader constituency of that “community of inquirers, the public,” to quote Carey once again (1989a, p. 88). The articles in this issue of the Canadian Journal of Communication draw attention to broadcasting policies, journalistic practices, and democratic politics as public matters locally and globally.

The public often acts as a normative concept in communications denoting an elusive ideal: not merely what is but what ought to be in a political republic or a democracy guided by agreed upon rules of governance. For example, C. Wright Mills (1956) famously contrasted the conditions that would favour the creation of public life rather than a mass society: the ratio of opinion givers must be greater than opinion receivers in a society of publics; one must be able to answer back without fear of reprisal; opinion-formation must be realizable in social action; and institutional authority must not have fully penetrated the public (Mills, 1956). Jürgen Habermas’ analysis of the rise of the liberal bourgeois public sphere, a space in which citizens debate their common affairs, is employed widely within our field and is often used as a standard to assess present conditions for rational political debates in the media, which are usually found wanting (Habermas, 1989). Both of these concepts of the public have had their critics. Some question the historical facticity of this theoretical ideal, pointing out that bourgeois public life was restricted to a particular educated class of European men of property considered to possess the capacity for rational thought (Landes, 1988). Others, such as Nancy Fraser, have recognized its pitfalls but posited the public sphere as a term worth reforming.

Acknowledging the exclusions embedded in the legacy of the concept, Fraser maintains that the public sphere is not for a homogeneous elite but necessarily comprised of co-existing factions and forces that she identifies as “subaltern counter publics” (1993, p. 15). These groups—women, people of colour, those
speaking minoritarian languages, gays and lesbians—are often dismissed as special interest groups and thus segregated from the larger public. For Fraser, they are integral. She further distinguishes between weak and strong publics: the former being completely separate from the state and only engaging in critical deliberation and discussion; the latter engaging in deliberation, opinion formation, and legally binding transformations. Fraser poses the question: “What institutional arrangements best ensure the accountability of democratic decision-making bodies (strong publics) to their (external, weak, or given the possibility of hybrid cases, weaker) publics?” (1993, p. 25).

The public sphere, in Fraser’s reading of it, is “the informally mobilized body of nongovernmental discursive opinion that can serve as a counterweight to the state” (1993, p. 24). The public sphere is a set of conditions that allows citizens as members “of the public—subaltern—or otherwise . . . to disseminate one’s discourse into ever-widening arenas” (1993, p. 15). This conception of both the public and the public sphere broaches issues of accountability, a concern of many of the authors included in this issue of the CJC. Although Fraser does not consider these matters in light of communications technologies, news and media formats, the ownership of public broadcasting or its licensing, these are essential if we are to take seriously her injunction to ponder “the limits of actually existing democracy” and our “capacity to imagine its future” (Fraser, 1993, p. 26).

The articles included in Public Matters directly and indirectly engage with these trajectories of thought and investigate the centrality of the media and communications to the democratic process. Marc Raboy’s 2005 Graham Spry Memorial Lecture, in honour of the legacy of this influential public broadcaster, opens the issue. A passionate plea for media policy is essential to the development of a democratic public sphere and public life, it is a fitting introduction to the articles that follow. For Raboy, whose talk focuses on the emergent global debate on Internet policy in the wake of the UN World Summit on the Information Society held in Tunis, “a new general framework of media governance is taking shape.” He asks us to consider “how issues of media governance will get resolved—and, consequently, how media are used.” Such matters go “to the heart of how every society in the world today will experience the twenty-first century.” In rekindling the concept of the public good with respect to Internet and broadcasting policy in the current climate of globalization, Raboy argues that politics and policy do not reside only in the realm of formal governmental institutions. He gives due to the transformative role played by a multiplicity of actors within civil society and encourages an active attention to policy. He charges communication scholars to make such issues matter as much to the public as health care provision, education, and the environment.

Within this vein of media policy, yet writing from another context, Fackson Banda’s commentary contrasts the responses of Zambia and South Africa to five salient aspects of globalization—liberalization, deregulation, privatization, communitarianism, and technological convergence—to call attention to the local conditions that shape broadcast policy in this region. His commentary analyzes how
local organizations and agents in southern Africa negotiate and respond differently to the incursion of global capital in their formulation of media policy.

Robert Sparks, Mary Lynn Young, and Simon Darnell pick up on these themes of policy, the Internet, and technological convergence in their cogent assessment of the “regulatory and market framework” implicit in the 2000 corporate restructurings of Bell Globalmedia, CanWest Global Communications Corp., and Quebecor Inc. While regulators saw the restructurings as “necessary responses to the demands of the new information economy,” the authors demonstrate that there was little “public discussion of the social, economic, or political impact of these restructurings.” Examining the strategic use of the rhetoric of convergence used by these corporations in their CRTC applications, they conclude that the result has not been the technological innovations promised, but greater corporate concentration. Sparks, Young, and Darnell provide both a valuable critique of the history of this key policy moment and a retrospective, empirically detailed assessment of the impact of licensing decisions on the Web formats that provide the news online.

In his 1943 speech to the Toronto Press Club, Harold Adams Innis explores the public opinion–making function of the press. Innis highlights the importance of “the periodical in molding public opinion, since the last war” and contrasts the public role of journalists in nineteenth-century Britain with Canada. In identifying a crisis in public opinion, Innis does not cast blame or identify a single instigating cause. Instead, he carefully unravels the complex conditions that have led to what he considers a “dangerous” tendency: “We have installed people who tell us what it is all about and what is going to be done and how it is going to be done.” As readers, we are treated to Innis’ analysis of the politics of his day and his own ideals: “There is no final answer in a democratic society. The planning is done by all.” Expressed more than sixty years ago, Innis’ concerns are eerily contemporary. He was fearful of changes he foresaw in the structure of government in the postwar period, including shifts in the anonymity of the civil service, the concentration of power in small groups (the Cabinet), and a lowering of standards of debate in the House of Commons.

Bill Buxton and Risa Dickens have brought Innis’ speech out of the archives into the public, annotated the talk in great detail, and analyzed its significance. Their rich historical commentary and annotations indicate the breadth of Innis’ knowledge of public affairs and journalism history. The nuances of Innis’ assessment of the politics of the press belie any claims that he was a technological determinist. This speech gives readers a taste of Innis performatively engaging with his audience. Finally, as Buxton and Dickens indicate in the subtitle to their article, “Engagement with Canadian Public Life as Backdrop to the Writing of Global Media History,” Innis was attentive to the local specificity and responsibilities of the Canadian press within the broader tendencies of the history of communications toward print and other spacing-binding media forms.

Politics, public responsibility, and the press are likewise central to Kirsten Kozolanka’s critical look at the infamous sponsorship scandal that dominated the
Canadian media in 2004-2005. Kozolanka carefully traces the roots of the scandal back to the 1980s and 1990s, arguing that the public’s focus on partisan politics ignored the systemic conditions that nurtured corruption—namely, the privatization of communications in the civil service and the “increasingly strategic role of communications in government and its negative impact on democratic citizen-government decision-making.” The sponsorship program, Kozolanka postulates, indicates a movement in the state to self-promotional activities. Within this rubric, public employees and public policymaking becomes “an extension of partisan interests” contributing to a “democratic deficit.”

The articulation of public policy, public-opinion formation, and the news is the subject of Myles Leslie’s detailed content analysis of the Globe and Mail’s coverage of the SARS epidemic. Leslie highlights the increasing deployment of a logic of “risk” by the media, business, and government as a means to justify political agendas. The risk logic that underlay the SARS stories in the Globe and Mail, he theorizes, oscillated between two distinct but overlapping models of risk: one precautionary, the other premised on metaphors of pollution. Although the SARS outbreak in Toronto is the author’s focus, Leslie considers the transborder implications of this event and the way this logic delineated “good” and “bad” members of the public along racial lines.

Many of the articles in this issue implicate the news media in the formation of public opinion and public policy. But what constitutes journalistic standards? The criteria used to judge excellence in journalism are the focal point of Ivor Shapiro, Patrizia Albanese, and Leigh Doyle’s detailed study. From their analysis of interviews with judges of journalism prizes, they conclude that “despite the widespread view that journalism’s primary social purpose is to serve the interests of democracy, judges were relatively slow to mention or emphasize the social benefit or public service of works of journalism.” A number of criteria, including serving the public interest, are considered when judging journalistic excellence. Yet when all other factors are accounted for, “more ideologically neutral (and, perhaps, more technical) aspects, such as storytelling skill” tip the scales when it comes to choosing the prize winners.

“To write,” as C. Wright Mills wisely commented, “is to raise a claim for the attention of readers” (Mills, 1959, p. 218). This issue continues the CJC’s experimentation with new media genres and the potential of online publication. Kate Richards’ media report on Life After Wartime (LAW) describes this innovative and ongoing multimedia project. Based on archival photographs of crime scenes taken in Sydney, Australia, after the Second World War, Life After Wartime deploys new media technologies and complex computer programming to engage spectators in past events by staging complex interactions with images, texts, and sounds. The LAW archive also furnishes our cover image of stolen television sets sitting on a sidewalk. These sets—uprooted from their familiar domestic surroundings, their screens blank—elliptically allude to any number of themes broached within the pages of this current issue of the Journal. They provide a compelling and strangely anthropomorphic image for you to contemplate as you read Public Matters.
Edward Said once wrote that to engage in intellectual pursuits is be “endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public” (1999, p. 11). Public Matters is dedicated to two figures, Jane Jacobs and James Carey, who embody Said’s definition of the public intellectual. Jacobs, who died on April 25, 2006, was a tireless social activist for ecologically sound municipal policies that would favour the maintenance of neighbourhoods. Her major work on the city, The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961), is a foundational text for those researching contemporary urban space. James Carey, writer, teacher, public intellectual, who died on May 22, 2006, had a profound connection to Canadian communications as a foremost commentator on Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan. A frequent visitor to many a campus north of the 49th parallel, Carey was a wonderful storyteller, an astute analyst of public issues, and a writer of brilliant clarity and insight. His contributions to journalism, communications, and cultural studies provided inspiration to many and will continue to do so. Jane Jacobs and James Carey will be missed, but not forgotten.

References
Carey, James. (1989a). Reconceiving “mass” and “media”. In Communication as culture: Essays on media and society (pp. 69-89). Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman.

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