Whatever else history may have to say about the mid-twentieth century, it will record that it was a period of enormous growth in the ability of human beings to move large quantities of messages almost instantaneously. The Science Council of Canada reports that while our energy capacities have increased 1,000 times in the past century and our weaponry capabilities 1,000,000 times, our communications capacities have increased 10,000,000 times. The great inventions and technological advances of our age have been almost exclusively concerned with the movement of information—images and words over distance. And the rate of invention has increased geometrically since the first telegraph message was sent in 1844. The diagram on the following page conveys something of the way communications developments have been coming in rapid succession over the past decades.

Canada has the greatest financial investment in communications technology of any country in the world on a per capita

M. Patricia Hindley,
Gail M. Martin &
Jean McNulty

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ACCELERATION IN COMMUNICATIONS DEVELOPMENT
basis. We make more telephone calls per person than any other people in the world. We seem also have a higher proportion of policy problems to solve. Communications issues make the front pages of the newspapers from time to time and they seem to be repeatedly concerned with questions of national sovereignty and cultural autonomy. Passions run high, misunderstandings are rampant, and few people can even agree on what the basic issues are.

We all have a grasp, however tenuous, of some of the implications and issues arising from communications development; and a cloudy sense, perhaps, that all advances are not being put to their best use. Each problem in communications is exceedingly complex and is related to other problems in various areas of the country, and all of them are enmeshed in a web of historical, economic, legal and political precedents and imperatives. The study of communications media is inextricably bound up with the study of the processes of social control and, ultimately, of the exercise of political and economic power. Much of this book is concerned with the theme of communications and power in contemporary Canada.

The fundamental question is: What should be the function of communications systems in a society?

In North America, we assume that whatever else communications systems may do, they must also sell soap, facilitate business transactions and generally promote the growth of the Gross National Product. They are also supposed, somehow, to contribute to the development of a well-informed and educated populace who can intelligently express their opinions at the polls and in the marketplace. The emphasis, however, has been placed on the development of good consumers at the expense of the development of good citizens.

Harold Innis, a Canadian economic historian, pointed out years ago the pitfalls of following a High Commission Technology Policy, as Canada has done over the past decades. Innis, who was interested in the structural effects of communications systems, came up with several principles regarding communications technology that are extremely useful in organizing our thinking about the role of communications technologies in society. He said that every advance in long-distance communications in Western civilization has been related to gaining domination over ever-wider reaches of territory. He saw
communications technologies as inseparably linked with the rise and fall of empires: they make empires possible, reinforce their centralized control, and can eventually help to displace one form of imperial rule with another.

Communications technologies make it possible for a centre (a developed urban area) to spread its influence to the periphery (a less developed, rural area). For example, the Anik satellite now makes it possible for the CBC to tell the Frobisher Bay Eskimos about parking problems in Toronto. Whether the Eskimos wish to know, or have any earthly use for the information, remains largely irrelevant. The technological capability to contact and inevitably extend control has been established.

In administering the empire, communications techniques foster an increasing centralization of authority. Closely related to this idea of the consolidation of empires is Innis’s notion of “monopolies of knowledge.” He pointed out that any variation of the speed with which individuals or particular groups receive information creates the conditions for that individual or group to establish monopolies of knowledge, and that political and economic power go hand in hand with control of the knowledge bases of society. But more important than control over data, he stated, was the power to define what shall be the data. Those in any society who have the power to define what is knowledge, what is relevant information, are the ones who create the belief systems and the myths by which the rest of the population lives. The simplest example from our own age is: Who decides what is the evening news?

Finally—and Innis is not often credited with having noticed this—the empire is never absolute. Some parts of the periphery or elsewhere escape the central influences. There, he says, counter-ideas take root, and at length, when conditions are right, infiltrate the decaying empire and insinuate themselves into the formation of a new order. The suggestion is that those who first grasp the implications of a new communications technology can turn it to their advantage in gaining the upper hand in the (inevitably) ensuing power struggle.

Another Canadian scholar, literary critic Northrop Frye, provides valuable insights on the relationship of communications to human enterprise and national purpose. Frye is concerned with the messages for which people use communications systems. He refutes Marshall McLuhan’s well-used dictum, the
medium is the message, by declaring that "the real communicating media are still...words, images, and rhythms, not the electronic gadgets that convey them." Frye also emphasizes the link between the media and power and authority, but his concern is with the nature of the messages with which we are constantly bombarded. He maintains that in socialist countries the bombardment reflects the anxiety of the rulers to stay in power, while in the West it reflects the eagerness of the economic establishment to keep the consumers buying. He sees the public as the passive recipient of incessant messages from the implacable voice, "unctuous, caressing, inhumanly complacent, selling us food, cars, political leaders, ideologies...and remedies against the migraine we get from listening to it." These messages are inevitably absorbed by those continually subjected to them, until they become the basis for individual thought processes, value judgments, speech patterns and social attitudes.

The predictable result of this use of a country's media, observes Frye, is resentment and open hostility against the messages and their authors. Protests, violence, vandalism, shouting of obscenities—all can be seen as acts of counter-communication. These in turn provoke from the media more journalistic commentary and in-depth analysis of social problems: "In other words, and other and other and other words, ... more and more and more communication from talking A to listening B..."

Assuming that "knowledge is power," what is the role of a communications system in society, or what might it be? It must not—or at least must not be perceived to—upset the balance of power. Karl Deutsch, a political scientist, who made communications central to his consideration of what constitutes a community, a society and a nation, states that the job which communications must do for a country is "the storage, recall, transmission, recombination, and reapplication of relatively wide ranges of information..."

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Communications play an organic role in defining a people and keeping them together. In a community, as in an organism, the system communicates internally to maintain its corporate identity, while at the same time it remains perceptive of changes in the environment to which it responds and adapts.

The model describes well, for example, the functioning of the Canadian business community. Communications links—Telex, telephone, data networks—keep business people efficiently and continually in touch with one another. Simultaneously they can have one eye open to development in the world market and be ready to move and adapt to meet changing conditions. The business world, from this point of view, demonstrates all the characteristics of a healthy community fed by adequate and well-utilized communications systems.

The same observations, however, cannot be made of this country as a cultural entity.

Karl Deursch continues his description of the function of communications within a culture by emphasising the importance of the complementarity of communications facilities, symbols and habits, so that the jobs of storage, recall, recombination and reapplication can be done efficiently, and states that only when a group is linked by complementary patterns of communication can it be called a people. This critical attribute of complementarity can be assessed for any country by answering three questions that Deutsch supplies: 1) How fast and how accurately do messages get through? 2) How complex and voluminous is the information that can be so transmitted? and 3) How effectively are operations on one part of the net transmitted to another? The answers to these questions reveal the state of communications efficiency of a country, and the degree to which its people are held together from within by their communications system.

The French- and English-speaking parts of Canada have virtually no cultural communications channels binding them. The French- and English-language radio and TV networks of the CBC are totally separate, and no exchange of programs occurs between them. Even with the English-language networks, very little exchange of programs between regions occurs; regional exchange of television programs is at a pitifully low level and such material is usually broadcast in off-peak viewing times.

Canada lacks culturally what it has so elegantly developed in
business: a well-functioning system of internal communications. This, of course, is what the public broadcasting system was designed to provide. In French Canada, it does. In English-speaking Canada, the nation's business is well attended to; its soul is not. As novelist Mordecai Richler observed so trenchantly some dozen or so years ago:

The most serious WASP cultural failure, Toronto's true tragedy, may yet be the undoing of a country. It is that after 97 years, it has still failed to provide Canada with a mythology, an inbred sense of nationhood, so that when the French Canadians in Quebec say, emotionally, they are a nation and want to get on with it alone, all Toronto can muster by way of a reply is a troubled and rational but uninspired plea -- Yes, yes possibly, but the business of government, the gross national product, the CPR and the CBC works better this way. Yes it works. But so does IBM. Toronto will have to come up with a better reason for the country than that.3

Of course, there may not be any better reason for this country than the economic and political advantages which its independence offers to some of its population. That is a currently unpopular stance, but one expressed in various ways by some of our eminent thinkers, including Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye. We prefer to leave that question, addressing ourselves instead to the following one. If the attainment and preservation of a distinct cultural identity are seen as a desirable national goal, then what steps must be taken to ensure that the country's communications systems function is such a way as to further that goal?3

From a cultural communications point of view, the diverse regions of the country are not in touch with one another: they have no means for continued and effective exchange of information with one another and about one another. And lacking that, Canadians have failed to achieve a second essential step to self-identity: the clear demarcation of the barrier that separates them from other peoples -- notably from the Americans. Groups achieve this sense of identity, at least partially, by defining who they are not, by recognizing clearly who are the members of the

in-group and who are the “others.” The process is somewhat analogous to the building up of immunities within the biological organism. Through constancy in its internal communications and recognition systems, plus exposure to outside influences, the body establishes a collective memory and a set of resistances to the intrusion of external agents recognized as “foreign.” It has been said that the only means Canadians seem to have of identifying themselves is in the negative statement: “We are not Americans.” We cannot say even that about our communications channels, for they are filled with American messages that few are prepared to reject or label as “foreign.” Our popular culture, our major entertainments and national pastimes, with few exceptions, are American—and most of us like it that way.

The issue of asserting Canada’s national identity in the face of foreign invasion of our communications is central to any understanding of contemporary policy in broadcasting, publishing and even satellites and computers. The CBC is formally instructed by Parliament in the Broadcasting Act to “contribute to the development of national unity and provide for a continuing expression of Canadian identity”—section 3(g) (iv). As Northrop Frye, with insight, puts it:

When the CBC is instructed by Parliament to do what it can to promote Canadian unity and identity, it is not always realized that unity and identity are quite different things to be promoting and that in Canada they are probably more different than they are anywhere else. Identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture; unity is national in reference, international in perspective, and rooted in a political feeling. Assimilating identity to unity produces the empty gestures of cultural nationalism; assimilating unity to identity produces the kind of provincial isolation which is now called separatism.4

We try to point out in this book that the way we are using our communications channels and setting our communications priorities is not helping to create a cultural identity. Our communications systems function efficiently in the interests of

maintaining and furthering the political and economic power of those who already have it, and this drive to power in practice prevents achieving the objectives of a sound communications policy—the fostering of culture, identity, and a sense of internal cohesion. Such objectives require complex communications with complementarity and high interchange ability among the parts that constitute the whole. A corollary of this is the development of a sense of separateness or otherness that recognizes and rejects alien influences when they threaten the integrity of the organism. As we will see, Canada lacks both an internal cultural network and a well-developed "immunity" reaction.

In this brief but wide-ranging discussion, we have touched on the roots of the issues that confront us in analyzing each of the communications industries in this country. Three main issues surface and recur throughout the book in the chapters on film, publishing, broadcasting, cable TV, telephone, computers and satellites. In their more familiar—and more superficial—form, these issues are:

1) Federal vs. provincial control in political and regulatory issues; national vs. regional interests in cultural terms; the Centre vs. the Periphery.

2) Canadian vs. American content in our communications channels.

3) Private vs. public ownership; the profit motive vs. national purpose. Recognition that in a country so small as Canada, a public network is necessary as a defence against American domination.

This first chapter attempts to establish the broad perspective from which we believe the endless details of technical, regulatory and economic material must be studied. Such detailed information is essential to anyone wanting to assess intelligently the newspaper reports about communications issues. We hope that the numbers of such people will steadily increase, so that the important questions will be asked. What is the purpose of our communications systems? What form should they take? Shall we assign priorities?

Without a vision of what our communications capabilities might do for us as a people, there is a clear danger that we shall continue as inarticulate consumers of American waste products. Instead we must learn, however slowly, to use our communications to fashion better communities for Canadians to live in.