Forging the Canon of Media Studies: Should We Heed the Plea for Timeless Texts?

William J. Buxton
Concordia University


These texts represent an awakened interest by communication scholars in the history of their field. While the two collections allude to developments in other parts of the world, they are primarily concerned with how media studies in the United States has emerged and taken shape. They can be understood as complementary components of a single project having some overlap but with different orientations. (As Peters and Simonson remark, their co-edited volume was “a kind of companion” to the other text.) The conceptual glue binding the two collections together was most likely provided by John Durham Peters, who served as a co-editor for both.

Canonic Texts in Media Research is premised on the view that certain writings in the field are (and should be) recognized as foundational points of reference. The collection had its origins in a conference, organized by Tamar Liebes, held at the Smart Institute at the Hebrew University in April 1996. This project, as the editors reveal, was not without its critics. When the project was announced at a session of the International Communication Association held in Acapulco in 2000, a colleague shouted irately, “You can’t do that!” Friends suggested to the editors that they should come up with a term other than “canonic” (such as “foundational,” “classical,” or “generative”) to define the collection. Undeterred by these criti-
cisms, the editors persisted and produced the volume with the term “canonic” retained in the title.

However, rather than exploring the issues raised by the book’s provocative subtitle (Are There Any? Should There Be? How About These?), the editors propose definite answers to the three queries. They contend that there are indeed canonic texts in media research. These works, they claim, are “the kind that won’t go away. . . [T]hey turn up repeatedly on our reading lists and in our bibliographies. They inspire us, haunt us, argue with us—but they won’t leave. Typically we keep them for ourselves” (back cover). Moreover, the editors argue that there should indeed be texts of this kind: “They define fields and communities. They are alive and breathing, standing the test of time by shedding old meanings and assuming new ones” (back cover). Having established to their satisfaction that there are and should be canonic texts in media studies, the editors present a slate of candidates for canonization. Each of the 13 chapters in the volume was intended to provide a critical reading of a particular classical text and, it would seem, to make the case for its recognition as part of the canon. The volume is organized into five parts, each representing a major “school” of communications research, namely, those of Columbia, Frankfurt, Chicago, Toronto, as well as British Cultural Studies. Each part is preceded by a brief introduction describing the nature and background of the school in question.

While using the schools as a point of departure for their analysis of the texts might have some heuristic value, it can also serve to frame our understanding of the material presented in a distorting and misleading manner. For instance, the Toronto School, as the editors note, is “famous for its technological determinism.” Yet scholarship over the past quarter century has demonstrated quite convincingly that this characterization is quite problematic. Indeed, the notion of schools as a way of organizing the selections can be called into question. A school of thought presupposes both a common purpose and an ongoing community. Although this designation works reasonably well for the Frankfurt School, it less easily depicts some of the others discussed in the volume. For instance, using the notion of a school to describe the work of those associated with University of Toronto–based thought implies a coherence that never really existed. While Innis and McLuhan were in sporadic contact at the University of Toronto, they never worked in a collaborative way in relation to communication, and McLuhan’s claim that he built on the foundations of Innis’ work is a highly dubious one. The designation “Chicago School” may have some relevance when strictly applied to the discipline of sociology; there was a concerted research program in this field at Chicago under Robert Park and Ernest Burgess and later within the collective work of what some have called the “Second Chicago School.” However, the inclusion of Dewey and Cooley within the Chicago School makes little sense; the former was a member of the philosophy department (1894-1904) well before Chicago Sociology cohered as a major force; the latter spent his entire career at the University of Michigan.

The volume, not surprisingly, is quite uneven. Whereas most of the texts selected for inclusion are essays, Raymond Williams’ Culture and Society and Marshall McLuhan’s Understanding Media depart from this standard because they are book-length treatments. It is not made clear why Williams and McLuhan are represented by complete monographs while the other authors’ contributions are
confined to selected essays. The work of Innis, for instance, is examined through his essay “The Bias of Communication” (which appeared as a chapter in the collection of the same name) and that of Adorno and Horkheimer through one chapter from The Dialectic of the Enlightenment. Aside from making a few very general remarks about the collection’s origins, the editors say very little about how the exemplars were chosen and what those assigned to prepare essays for the volume were asked to do. Indeed, the contributors take very different approaches when interpreting their selected texts.

Some make a strident case that the text in question ought to be recognized as a canonic work. Joel Meyerowitz, for instance, champions McLuhan against his critics and argues that McLuhan’s Understanding Media is now more relevant than ever. Some offer an appreciative reading without pressing the text’s merits as a possible classical work. Others use the work in question as a point of departure for exploring the author’s work in general (as Mehanem Blondheim does for Innis). Some offer revisionist readings of a text, such as that by Peter Simonson and Gabriel Weimann on Merton’s and Lazarsfeld’s “Mass Communication, Popular Taste, and Organized Social Action.” Paddy Scannell’s approach to interpreting “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” by Walter Benjamin, is to provide a detailed contextualization of this much-cited essay. Tamar Liebes chooses to move in the other direction, examining Herta Herzog’s “On Borrowed Experience” in relation to recent debates about the audience. John Durham Peters examines his object of discussion—namely Raymond Williams’ Culture and Society—against the backdrop of debates as well. But his point of reference is not contemporary discussions but rather the controversy that surrounded mass culture in the United States during the 1950s. Don Handelman confines himself to articulating the argument advanced by Donald Wohl and Richard Horton in their essay “Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction.”

If one tries to read the collection in terms of the editors’ claims of advancing a slate for canonization, disappointment will be almost inevitable. Because the contributors treat their assignments in radically disparate ways, it is difficult to assess whether or not the work in question qualifies as a major contribution to the field of communication. Also, since the criteria for canonization are spelled out only vaguely, it is difficult for the reader to engage with the selections in the manner suggested by the authors, that is, to disagree or agree with the slate of works recommended for canonization. However, if the volume is considered more modestly—not as a would-be canon but simply as a collection of essays interpreting and evaluating particular key works—then it can be read in a much more useful and profitable manner. In sum, the editors have succeeded in putting together a valuable collection of essays providing important insights into a well-chosen set of texts. But the questions they raise in their intriguing subtitle remain rhetorical rather than convincingly answered.

Mass Communication and American Social Thought shares with its companion text the preoccupation with establishing a body of work that could serve as a point of reference for media studies. However, rather than identifying the peaks of the field, the editors have sought to survey as best they could the entire range of mountains that have made up the study of mass communications. Moreover, perhaps because of the controversy that the notion of creating a canon engendered, the edi-
tors of this volume have presented their initiative in a much more muted and less provocative manner than the companion volume. They have also described their principles of selection and organization in a manner that is much more detailed and nuanced than that given in *Canonic Texts*. One might quibble with the volume’s geographical focus (the United States), its time frame (1919 to 1968), and its principles of selection (individual qualities of the works and their contribution to portraying American mass communication studies). But at least it is clear how the collection was put together. Overall, the volume consists of 68 texts and excerpts about mass communications. It is divided into three parts, each corresponding to a particular time period (1919-33, 1933-49, 1949-68). The editors provide thorough introductions to each part, along with brief biographies for each writer they have chosen for inclusion.

Within the boundaries that it has established for itself, the work is both balanced and comprehensive. In addition, the authors effectively convey their enthusiasm for what they have discovered and for the thrill of the chase. They present a view of mass communications that is much richer and more variegated than those conventionally offered. The introductions and the short biographies work well and help to contextualize the material in question. Although the book is difficult and tedious to read cover to cover, one can profitably dip into it to examine particular texts or genres within their historical contexts. The volume’s rich and diverse content serves notice that mass communications is still very much a *terra incognita* in terms of its history as a field.

But for all of its impressive comprehensiveness, the volume does not stray far from the conventional narrative of how successive thinkers have sought to make sense of phenomena such as propaganda, public opinion, mass society, and mass culture. And although its editors claim to cover the “big five” of mass communication—namely film, radio, television, newspapers, and magazines (they have actually gone beyond the “big five” by including essays by Adorno and MacDougald on music)—writings on these media have not been included in equal measure. For instance, important contributions to film scholarship by writers such as Paul Rotha, Paul G. Cressey, John Grierson, and Siegfried Kracauer have been overlooked. More fundamentally, the decision to accept the conventional view that mass communications was comprised only of the “big five” has meant that a good deal of important reflection on communication phenomena has likely been ignored. These include writings on educational/library technologies such as film strips, microfilm, and tachistoscopes; on mass-consumer objects such as the stereoscope and the View-Master; on theatre and its variants (such as historical re-enactments like the living newspaper); as well as on spatially based forms of communication (such as museums and world expositions, where the audience is immersed in the medium rather than the medium transmitting sound and images to a dispersed audience).

The standpoint of the volume also makes for a skewed treatment of its subject matter. The purpose of the volume, it would seem, is to provide an inventory of the outstanding contributions to the field with a view to establishing its foundations. This exercise could indeed facilitate the consolidation of a communication discipline by providing standard points of reference. But it also runs the risk of imposing current standards of scholarship—namely those related to detached and value-neutral inquiry—on the historical writings under examination. This means
that the volume fails to adequately address how a good number of the works discussed were not the product of disinterested reflection; they represented, rather, an effort to produce knowledge that could serve to reconfigure society along particular lines. For instance, the section on the Chicago School does not adequately discuss the approach developed by Robert Park, which was grounded in the notion that tendencies toward social disorganization in urban areas could be overcome through the engaged activity of sociologists working in conjunction with official agencies. To this end, media (such as newspapers) that created communities among immigrant communities were generally viewed quite positively, while those that were thought to incite emotional, irrational action (such as movies, radio, and automobiles) were held in disrepute.

The neglect to adequately address the practical aspects of communication writings has another unfortunate consequence: the authors have not given sufficient attention to the organizations that sought to direct communication inquiry toward practical ends, namely philanthropic bodies such as the Rockefeller Foundation, the General Education Board, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The editors make scant mention of the fact that a good number of the works they chose to include had their origins in initiatives funded by philanthropic bodies and represented efforts to ameliorate public life through transforming and redirecting the media. Because these writings have been severed from such an important aspect of their contexts, the framing that is so essential to understanding their original design and meaning has been lost.

For instance, it should have been noted (p. 75) that the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* was funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and it represented a collective effort to generate a repository of knowledge that would have beneficial social consequences. Along the same lines, more could have said about the purpose of the Payne Fund Studies (namely to counteract the purported harmful effects that movies were having on children) and how the two studies that it commissioned to Herbert Blumer were informed by this overarching framework. Moreover, because these philanthropic foundations are (more often than not) mentioned only in passing, the information provided about them can be misleading if not entirely wrong. It is claimed, for example, that John Marshall (a Rockefeller officer) was an important funding source for Paul Lazarsfeld’s research. This assertion is quite imprecise and could lead to confusion. It was only by virtue of his position as assistant to the director of the Humanities Division—and as an officer with the General Education Board—that Marshall was able to encourage the work of Lazarsfeld. However, ultimate authority over the programs rested not with Marshall but with the respective boards of trustees for the Rockefeller Foundation and for the General Education Board, which did not always accept his recommendations.

The editors also fail to underscore the practical and strategic nature of the Rockefeller-funded initiatives in the area of communication. For instance, the purpose of the famous Communications Seminar of 1939-40 was not simply to develop the basis for systematizing research in the emergent field; it was put together specifically by John Marshall to get the Princeton Radio Research Project (ineffectively directed by Paul Lazarsfeld) on track. Marshall was concerned that the project was lacking in both direction and focus, and was worried that Lazarsfeld would have
difficulty demonstrating to the board of trustees that his venture merited a renewal of funding. The goal of the Communications Seminar was not so much the lofty one of establishing the foundations of a new field; it was the much more prosaic and short-term one of salvaging what appeared to have been a poorly directed and unfocused research project. Some of the basic facts about the project are also mistaken. It began in 1937 (not 1936) and initially had three co-directors (Lazarsfeld, Frank Stanton, and Hadley Cantril), not just Lazarsfeld alone.

The failure to adequately examine the practical nature of communications research (as framed by the engaged concerns of the foundations) means that the broader stakes related to the changing place of media in the United States have not been explored. Arguably, the mediascape that informed American public life was very much a contested terrain. Its main axis, emerging in the 1930s, was the tension between commercial media and educational or documentary media. While the former sought to generate profits through providing entertainment to a mass audience, the latter concerned itself with working in tandem with schools in their pedagogical goals and increasing public awareness about issues of national concern. *Mass Communication and American Social Thought* covers commercial media in some detail. But it gives inadequate attention to the educational media, and to the extent to which this form of communication was in conflict with private media concerns. Reconciling the public interest with the overwhelmingly commercial direction of American media became a major preoccupation of the foundations, as evident in initiatives such as the Princeton Radio Research Project and the Payne Fund Studies. It is perhaps unreasonable to expect *Mass Communication and American Social Thought* to have examined in detail how the philanthropies sought to find common ground for commercial- and educational-media interests. However, had the volume given more attention to the important role played by foundations in shaping the theory and practice of American communications, its discussion of the context for the development of media studies in the United States would have been considerably augmented.

Given what we have learned about earlier efforts to define fields by assembling what were thought to be their foremost written works, there is likely more to the scope and content of the two volumes than an interest by their editors in surveying and buttressing the foundations of media studies. An enterprise of this kind, by elevating particular writings to pre-eminent status, could help to strengthen the emergent field of media studies by providing it with a roster of founding figures, research exemplars, common points of reference, and more clearly demarcated boundaries. If media studies were to become solidified along these lines, those who identify with it could very well reap benefits such as greater recognition by the academic community at large, better prospects for professional advancement, and increased access to research funding. But this enhanced status and power, it can be argued, may come at an intellectual price. The selection of particular texts and authors for inclusion within what is considered to be the core of the field also serves to stigmatize the work of writers not included as less deserving of our attention, thereby consigning them to the margins. (Sociology, for example, is still struggling with the ill-conceived decision by some of its leading proponents to include neither Karl Marx nor Georg Simmel—not to mention Harriet Martineau and W.E.B. DuBois—within its pantheon of founding figures.) Perhaps more significantly, by privileging detached
scholarly analysis as the norm for intellectual practice, the editors of the two volumes have not only obscured the activist impulses that have underpinned studies of the media, but have made it more difficult for us to draw on this body of work to reflect on the meaning and purpose of our own interventions. Before media studies can ponder Santayana’s well-worn claim that a field that hesitates to forget its founders is lost, it needs to clarify whether foundational thinking is appropriate to an area of study whose origins are not only subject to contestation but are shifting, inchoate, and inextricably bound up with the designs of practical interests.

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Note
1. While the editors’ effort to include Canadian thinkers within the volume was undoubtedly well intended, their framing of this inclusion reveals an insensitivity to issues of Canadian national identity. McLuhan and Innis were not Americans and should not be considered as American thinkers. If the authors wished to include them within the collection, then the geographical purview of the collection should have been expanded to (north-of-Mexico) North America, with attention given to the particularities (and peculiarities) of Canadian cultural and intellectual history. Moreover, if the editors were serious about finding a place for Canadian media thought in their collection, they should have emphasized the contributions of the broader Toronto-based network as well as those of thinkers such as Graham Spry and Dallas Smythe. Finally, the facts provided about the Canadian careers of some of the authors covered in the volume could have been checked more carefully. For instance, Everett Hughes taught at McGill University and Université Laval, but not at Université de Montréal (p. 118); and Marshall McLuhan did not go directly from St. Louis University to the University of Toronto—he taught at Assumption College in Windsor from 1944-46, prior to accepting a position in Toronto.