Reviews


Through the years, there has been an extensive amount of research devoted to the history of media and communication in Canada. However, the research has been quite narrow in focus, as suggested by Gene Allen & Daniel J. Robinson, the editors of Communicating in Canada’s Past: Essays in Media History. Most of what has been written about media history has been built around a variety of technologies and has primarily looked at the content of their outputs. The objective of this book, therefore, is to emphasize the wide-ranging scope of current and future research in this field by providing the first collection of original papers on Canadian media history that surpass the notion of media as “end products or content” to present media as “integrated, complex systems involving production and dissemination” (p. 5). Although the book’s content is diverse, there is a continuous discourse that unites the texts, as illustrated by empirical and theoretical evidence of a so-called “cultural shift.”

The first paper, by Dominique Marquis, strikes a good balance between theory, historical context, and empirical methodology. It tears down the assumption that all news-based press was homogeneous during the first 30 years of the Québec publication L’Action catholique. It also provides a good example of the possible uses of comparative analysis and content analysis in media-history research. Unfortunately, in such a succinct paper, it is difficult to get a sense of the original content, as visual examples are left out.

The only other paper about news coverage is Alison Jacques’ account regarding the “torso murder case.” Through discursive analysis of four Canadian daily newspapers, the piece presents the reader with an account of the event; an overview of the coverage, which focused mostly on Evelyn Dick’s image; a description of the trial spectators, and an analysis of the use of the soap opera as an analogy to characterize the event. However, the paper describes its methodology in very little detail.

Gene Allen’s paper on the conflict between the Canadian Press and radio news is key to understanding the purported battle of technologies that emerged with the creation of radio. Though literature has demonstrated how these two forms of broadcasting were at odds on different fronts, this paper provides nuance and offers an explanation for the early fears of newspaper owners, as well as insight into advertising policies. Since not much has been written on this topic, it is a welcome addition to media literature.

The least original paper is Simon J. Potter’s piece on Britain’s role in the birth of Canadian public broadcasting. When reading the paper, it is difficult to shake the feel-
ing that it mimics other works, perhaps because it relies heavily on writings by other well-known specialists on Canadian broadcasting history, such as Allard, Peers, and Vipond. Also, for anyone who has ever read the Aird Commission report, texts by or about Graham Spry, or Raboy’s *Missed Opportunities* (1990), not much here is new. Nonetheless, for students or someone new to the field, this paper is a great summary of the events surrounding the creation of the public broadcasting system in Canada.

Daniel Robinson’s paper on Seagram advertising campaigns promoting moderate drinking seems a bit out of context after reading the preceding papers, which are primarily about news and broadcasting. Nevertheless, given the book’s objective, it is fitting. Furthermore, advertising does have an important link to broadcasting that one could tap into if so inclined. But, in its own right, studying the art and meaning of Seagram ads opens a window onto the Bronfman family and the Canadian social dynamic of the times. This paper is timely as it comes on the heels of a dissertation called “Known by the Company It Keeps: Popularizing Seagram in the Canadian Imagination” by Lisa Sumner (McGill University). In a similar fashion, James Cairns’ paper (the seventh in the book) not only captures the look and feel of election campaign pamphlets in Ontario, but also provides a useful theoretical and empirical framework for analyzing these media.

The sixth paper of the book is dedicated to the study of Dominion/Canada Day television programming at specific points in time, including the first broadcasts in 1958 and 1960, which were driven by Diefenbaker’s Conservative government; the 1965 and 1966 broadcasts, which were meant to prepare Canada for the centennial celebrations; and the 1977 and 1978 broadcasts, which served as a response to the heated Québec nationalist movements. These programs were studied to discover how they were used as tools to promote national identity. Though the author manages to achieve his objectives in a succinct fashion, it is unfortunate that the author did not refer to *Culture, Communication and National Identity* by Collins (1990) to explain the consequences of this national event for Canadian identity and unity over time.

The papers of Mary Vipond and Fernande Roy could have served as a conclusion to this book (it does not have one), as they pave the way for future research in media history. There would, however, be a few caveats. For one thing, Vipond focuses on radio and television broadcasting, whereas this book includes other media, such as pamphlets, news coverage in the printed press, and advertising campaigns. Secondly, Roy focuses on media-history research solely in the province of Québec, whereas the book is more national in scope. Vipond’s suggestions also seem particularly aimed at historians defined in the classic sense—working in a history department or having studied there—whereas the tasks proposed, such as increasing research on audiences, programming, and programs with a historical perspective, could be shared with people in fields such as communication, journalism, or sociology.

Rutherford’s paper ties in to Fernande Roy’s evidence of a cultural turn in Québec. His personal narrative offers unique insight into how a researcher has gone about finding a “frame.” This candid journey through theory is relevant to those who struggle to find the “perfect fit” and who are inclined to prefer a multitheoretical approach. It is also serves as an example for young scholars trying to grapple with the process of research.
In conclusion, this book constitutes a good overall collection of papers that reads more like an appetizer than a main course, always making the reader want more. Hopefully these scholars will further develop their work, allowing for more comprehensive accounts. The wide scope of works presented here, however, does provide food for thought on the breadth of media history and paths for future reflection on a diversity of mediums and their meanings.

Reference

*Geneviève A. Bonin*, University of Ottawa