Communication And Knowledge In Canadian Communication Theory: The Context Of The University And The Academy

DONALD F. THEALL, Trent University

The University occupies a much more central role as a communication institution than many scholars have realized. History of communication, if it goes back beyond the introduction of electric technology, necessarily is intricately involved with the university and its importance in the development and distribution of knowledge. In fact, the major problem for the university and for communication theory has become the way to integrate a communicative-interpretive basis for the study of communication with the social, historic and biological aspects of communication. While such a reflection on education and communication appears in the work of communication theorists in diverse places and at diverse points in history, Canadian communication theory has been strongly preoccupied with and influenced by the university. This fact has been overlooked owing to the rather simplistic tension between the university and producers of communication that developed under the influence of the mass media, though even in that sphere the role of the professor as communicator has usually been disregarded.

John Grierson, founder of the National Film Board of Canada, once said that education is the largest single mass medium in our society and that the university is the most influential part of that educational system. For Grierson, who believed fervently in the power of the new mass media, to say this of the university was a significant recognition of how intrinsically the evolution of the university and the evolution of communication have been intertwined in the Western world. Grierson’s perspective on education, however, horrified Harold Innis (a co-participant in the Trueman commission on adult education in Manitoba in 1946) for Innis’ reservations about adult education in which Grierson

considered himself deeply involved, centered precisely around the complicity that he saw between the adult education movement and the massification of society with the attendant threats to the university. On the other hand, with respect to the influence of education, he and Grierson would have shared the recognition of the influence of the war on the phenomena which were taking place in the world of communication in the late 40's, for under Grierson the National Film Board as the successor of the Wartime Information Board consciously evolved to assume the role of producing counter-cultural propaganda against the very sophisticated techniques of U.S. post-war commercial propaganda. If Hitler and work on the Wartime Information Board taught Grierson the power of film, newspapers and radio, it also taught him the power of the educational system as an instrument of communication and control.

This anecdotal reflection dramatizes the role of the university as an institution in the problems of communication studies and the awareness of that situation among Canadians thinking about communications. This essay will explore further the relation between Canadian communication theory and the university as a context in which it developed as a means of engaging in a polemic exposition of the perennial importance in the western world of the university as a key institution in the total system of communication. Furthermore, the argument will show how a possible future for communication theory will emerge out of a reintergration of those areas of university activity involved with communicative-interpretive concerns.

Communications theory in Canada begins with a strong stress on the importance of the structure of the university and a self-reflection on the part of those involved in the university on its nature. The work of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, which provided a special Canadian leadership in communication theory, was shaped in part by the specific context of the University of Toronto and both of them were closely concerned with reflecting on the university as an institution — an interest they placed close to the center of their writings on communication and technology. Their work provided Canadian communication theory with an inheritance of a richly diversified background involving a surprising array of intellectual concerns and disciplines. A concern with history, philosophy, the humanities, and the arts joined with an amalgam of English, French, Continental and U.S. influences which are reflected in the marked difference between recent Canadian developments and those dominant trends in communication studies in the U.S. clearly illustrate a richer, more varied and more balanced universe of discourse. (It should be noted, however, that there is an increasing interest in the U.S. in the more philosophically and theoretically oriented concerns with communications.) By now, either through the period of Innis or McLuhan or subsequent to it, the range of
reference encompasses such scholars as Gregory Bateson (whose *Communications: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry* was an important influence on McLuhan), Lewis Mumford (who influenced McLuhan and Innis), the Frankfurt School, Habermas, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, the semiologists and their successors from Barthes to Deleuze and the innumerable U.S. representatives of the empirical study of communications.

The direction of their interests was by no means unique, for a theoretic concern with a cluster of relationships such as the relationship of communication with the history of philosophy, the academy itself, the development of higher education and the evolution of the university is manifested in the work of some contemporary European theorists of communications as well as in some of the U.S. predecessors of Innis, such as John Dewey. Most recently Habermas’ work in epistemology and the foundations of rationality which has included a theory of communication and communicative competence as well as a theory of interpretation is an example of the explicit involvement of the role of the university as an institution both in understanding the problems of knowledge and human interests and those problems of social relationships which involve human communications.

These issues are part of a developing theory concerning the position of the university as an institution evolving out of Western history which identifies the competing interest of the role of the communicative-interpretive commitment of the liberal arts and the practical-instrumental interests of technology and the pragmatically oriented professions and sciences. Such a competition seems to be implicit in the institution itself for at the particular point in history when the medieval university emerged, theology, law and medicine represented such instrumental interests. Against that important cluster of interests the communicative-interpretive perspective created a natural base for the conception of the liberal arts as manifested in the existence of the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, even though the power and authority of the theological and legal interests often took precedence in governance and in power relationships.

Following the Second World War there emerged in Canada at both a theoretical and practical level a temporary realization of the intricate inter-relations between what has come to be described somewhat awkwardly as the *cultural industries*, the *knowledge industries* and the *communication industries*. This is represented theoretically in the interests of Innis and McLuhan and in a practical way through the evolution of the National Film Board, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and government communications policy. Of most immediate interest to the study of Innis, McLuhan and the birth of Canadian communication theory, this awareness led to a self-reflection on the university as part of the problem of
communication. The University as it was represented in a particular institution, the University of Toronto, also played a significant role in shaping the direction of the work not only of Innis and McLuhan, but of others who further developed their theoretical directions as well as their own independent theoretical orientations (e.g., Ernest Havelock) (fn-RVM). The climate and context for developing a theory in Canada differed from the situation in the United States, because empirical and behavioral studies had not come to occupy as strong an authoritative role with regard to communication study. It differed from the European situation in having the post-war conditions to attend more immediately to the problem of technological change and human communications. Besides, the university in Canada is a peculiar fulcrum balancing those historic and philosophic interests traditionally grounded in Europe (with special emphasis on the United Kingdom and France) and those newer influences of pragmatism and empirical research from the United States. Such a fulcrum creates a point of high intensity — a margin where the forces of intellectual conflict manifest themselves more dramatically. Even in their institutional structure, Canadian universities represent interesting compromises between the self-governance of the older British universities and the dominant control of private boards and government characteristic of the United States. (It is noteworthy that Innis in his various manuscripts which are in the process of publication, even more than in his previously published works, called attention to this situation.) In a very different way the role that Canada played as a go-between for the various allies, East and West, in the Second World War, again indicates a special vantage point not only for John Grierson who participated in such activities, but especially for an older, more senior scholar such as Innis — less so for McLuhan and Frye who were much younger and much less directly concerned with the war experience.

The fact that the University of Toronto encompassed within its major interests a recognition of theological differences respected in the founding of Canada enabled it to embrace a range of questions which seemed to be more closely related academically to the U.S. than to Europe. This strong, central theological orientation which Innis, as the rest of the liberal University of Toronto establishment probably rightly feared as an inhibition to the development of knowledge, nevertheless provided a strong theoretic-historic interest in the history of theological problems, their background in the liberal arts and their concern which hermeneutic and apologetic activities and did so across a spectrum of competing theological interests: from Methodist and Presbyterian to Low and High Church and Roman Catholic, sprinkled with a substantial spirit of dissent and non-belief. Unlike the U.S. the atmosphere was openly theological, therefore
more accepting of the philosophic-theoretic and more concerned with a defence of humanism. From this rich background Innis could find the variety of dialectical interests in the early history of the Church, classical learning, mediaeval thought and Enlightenment critique which was to shape his vision of the history of communication. From the same background McLuhan could develop his interest in the trivium, in hermeneutics, in disputation and debate, preaching and ritual which were to shape his more superficial engagement with culture and technology as figured forth in the production of mass media, popular culture, and the traditional and newer arts. The context of a specific university, though important as a source for materials, was secondary to self-reflection on the institution itself.

Since Canada lacked a fully developed university system in the 1940's and early 1950's, the Canadian academic could more readily question the nature and direction of the university as an institution. More likely, like McLuhan, the Canadian academic had attended a university in the U.K. and possibly a second one in the U.S., or like Innis he had attended one of the older U.S. universities. Nevertheless his scholarly life was vitiated by both cultures and he had to query for himself the form of the institution in which he was working. Both Innis and McLuhan did this. Innis' inquiry started late in his career as a historian of political economy when in Empire and Communication he first showed an appreciation of the problem of the monopoly of knowledge which was closely related to the study of communication and the university. McLuhan's inquiry (since his career was beginning as Innis' ended) extended throughout most of his work. It appears most prominently in earlier writings such as his doctoral thesis on the history of trivium as a backdrop to the Harvey-Nashe debate in Renaissance England, the Gutenberg Galaxy a history of how technology changed communication and the development of knowledge; and in his early manifestoes such as those in Explorations and Verbi-Voco-Visual Presentiment. These latter documents as well as the Gutenberg Galaxy are clearly manifestoes in part about the need for a new learning — a new Renaissance.

Innis and McLuhan's self-reflections on the environment in which they carried on their practice as scholars was related constantly to the broader problem of communication, since communication had to do with facts, information, value feelings — a complex, at least traditionally, with which the university had been concerned. It also, as Innis realized and McLuhan was never to admit, had to do with power and power relationships — it exercised control and was an object against which control was exercised. As he emphasized, it was often most fruitfully developed on the margins where force was strongly evident, and it thrived under the protection of force.

Innis' work provided the political insight into the processes of
communication, which McLuhan's work seriously lacked. McLuhan, on the other hand, grounded the actual process of learning how to communicate more firmly in the university and allied educational activities by stressing the way in which the *trivium* provided a theory of communication and by stressing the importance of grammar and intervention (the first part of rhetoric) as providing a related theory of interpretation. While McLuhan's misuse of Innis' work should never be accepted, the value of a major part of his work as a parallel to Innis (tracing the surfaces of exposition for which Innis provides the historical-political-economic guide) can be too easily ignored. McLuhan's interest in such problems, as his writings clearly demonstrate, did not arise from a sense of history as much as from the practical desire to solve dilemmas existent in the contemporary university. Consequently, the university as a place provided the first questioning of our understanding of communication by McLuhan. The university as an institution which had to respond to shifts in power and control reflected in communication and technology is also one of the focal points of Innis' awareness of the intricate interaction of institutions dedicated to the selective transmission of knowledge which created the monopolies of knowledge that are an important factor in his theoretical orientation. The recent publication of his notes in *Idea File* depicts a picture of the brave new world of the modern multiversity. He intuits that his own university is rapidly transforming itself into such a mould. In a previously published essay presented as an address at the 150th anniversary of the University of New Brunswick, Innis criticizes William James' definition of culture:

> If we venture to use this definition, we are aware immediately of the trends in universities to add courses because people like to do them or because they will be useful to people after they graduate and will enable them to earn more money. In turn courses are given because members of the staff of universities like to give them, an additional course means a larger department and a larger budget and, moreover, enables one to keep up with the subject. These tendencies reflect a concern with information. They are supported by the text-book industry and other industries which might be described as information industries. Information is provided in vast quantities in libraries, encyclopedias and books. It is disseminated in universities by the media of communication including moving pictures, loud speakers with radio and television in the offing. (p. 84 *Bias*)

Some thirty years later we can add Telidon and data banks. Some other jottings from Innis' *Idea File* confirm the extent to which he was
committed to this type of analysis of the university. He speaks, for example, of the "Tyranny of erudition — characteristic of modern scholars — necessity of creating impression by knowledge — neglect of human relations with students in order to impress knowledge."
The educational system could easily:
become a building up of mazes — teaching students to go through the maze and using the maze to test capacity. Examinations studied as system of mazes and various approaches covered by best teachers — emphasized memory. Neglect of training of intellectual capacity — ability to meet and solve problems. (I.F. 268)
Such a situation appeared to be a result of the:
Impact of increasing knowledge and number of facts shown in the growth of libraries and increasing registration in universities — largely concerned with retailing facts. Government support to large scale marketing of facts. (I.F. 268)
The printing industry, emphasizing newness and the news-like-character of modern learning, tended to bury the work of the past to produce textbooks which lead to the neglect of basic minds and are "models of arrangement and manipulation rather than emphasis on original thought." (I.F. 268) Throughout his analysis Innis confronts the "problem of the universities in overcoming the effect of mechanization." (I.F.271) which he somehow linked in his mind to "Communism — the conflict between the sciences and the humanities — mysticism." Innis makes this connection because he (before Mumford's Myth of the Machine) saw communism, fascism and printing all as participating in "preparing people for the discipline of the machine". As part of this process of discipline, the printing industry included the disciplining of language and literature (I.F. 123)
There should be little doubt that the discovery, control and dissemination of knowledge were closely concerned in Innis' mind with the basic problems of communication and that in part these emerged from a reflection on the distortions which had developed in the contemporary institution of the university. While the range of universities across the world controlled a "monopoly of knowledge", the North American university was threatened by an invasion of mechanization and routinization. Yet even the humanities in their conflict with the sciences represented a kind of false direction leading to "mysticism". Like the earlier British universities, this was combined with an interest in "power" and "political influence" and overlooked the richness of the oral tradition in the French universities. If Innis could realize the importance of humanities for issues raised in the humanities, even though he called attention to their weakness — the sciences being "compelled to pull the enormous
burden of the humanities’ rigidities” — he also appears to have felt that the contemporary university could be reintegrated through serious attention to communication and the control and dissemination of knowledge which would provide it with an essential place in the critique of the evolving world of mechanically (really technologically) reproduced information. Strangely enough, McLuhan, though he often veers into that mysticism which the rationalist Innis greatly feared, also began his interest in communication with a critique of the decline of the humanities. As early as 1946, McLuhan was employing his researches into the history of grammar and rhetoric to analyze the quarrel in contemporary American education. His Ancient Quarrel in Modern America was published in the Classical Journal. He concludes that essay:

Without proceeding into the kind of detail possible only in a book, I have done what I could to suggest that behind the immediate controversy about the great books program lies not only the basic ancient cleavage of American culture, but a quarrel whose roots are in Ancient Greece. Between the speculative dialectician who says that “the glory of man is to know the truth by my methods” and the eloquent moralist who says that “the bliss of man is good government carried on by copiously eloquent and wise citizens”, there need be no conflict between these parties when either attempts to capture the entire education of an age or country. (Lit Crit 231)

Later McLuhan abandoned his “moral” concern through being coopted to the prevailing positivisms of value free studies. Nevertheless, in his development of the history of communication at the commencement of his career, he identifies that tension between the communicative-interpretative aspect of the university involving the grammarians, the rhetoricians and many of the philosophers, and the production of technically exploitable knowledge which had produced the dialecticians and later the scientists and other methodologists. The Mechanical Bride was a confused attempt to discover a way of developing a moral basis for communication theory through developing a technique (unfortunately not a theory) of interpretation. The preoccupation with technique revealed the weaknesses that led to McLuhan’s later commitment to technological determinism. The issues raised in this work and the starting point of his thought from a concept of the university remained throughout the rest of his work resulting in a problematic equally as suggestive, if not as rationally developed as the contributions of Innis. The Mechanical Bride actually was conceived as a way of demonstrating a method of teaching which would transform learning in the humanities and thus reinvigorate and
revitalize the university. McLuhan's *Gutenberg Galaxy* also relates his interest in communication to the problem of the dissemination of knowledge and its control. It manifests a specific interest in university curricula and their organization as well as exploring the role of other institutions, such as the church, in this process of dissemination and control. Although later he somewhat revised his opinion, in view of McLuhan's dangerous tendency towards technological determinism, Raymond Williams' early perceptions of the *Galaxy* considered it an important contribution to the history of communication and regarded it as "a significant contribution to problems of advanced communication theory...a wholly indispensable book." (Hot and Cool, 189)

This argument that we have been developing clearly demonstrates that a major difference marking off Canadian involvement in communication from that in the U.S. is the central role which a greater self-consciousness concerning the university as itself a communication institution closely linked to the information, cultural and industrial complexes occupied in Canadian discussions. The future of preserving a distinctive Canadian approach in communication will necessarily involve continued self-reflection on the university as that institution most centrally engaged in the discovery, control and dissemination of information and knowledge. This remains a crucial factor only partly because the university produces most of the more influential practitioners of communication. While it would be interesting to explore such inter-relationships within the Canadian context, neither McLuhan nor Innis would have argued that the university contribution in this direction had been especially positive. Much more basic, however, is the crucial role that an emphasis on communicative-interpretive knowledge ought to have within the study of the human sciences to bring about a reformation of the contemporary university. Such a reformation would evade the problems posed by Innis' dilemma of the opposition of time and space by developing more organic and ecological and less mechanistic models of communication.

Innis' work points in these directions, for while he sees the demand for education as historically related to the emergence of demands for control of space and time, he is aware that there are aspects of a concern with time that would lead to the development of a rich theory of communication through balancing the demand to control space by a countervailing interest in time. The communicative-interpretive aspects of the humanities and social sciences are necessarily concerned with time, since the development of a communicative-interpretive theory involves a historic and organic orientation. The techno-empirical sciences are more directed towards a concern with the control of space, though the distinction is by no means rigid, suggesting trends rather than full scale oppositions. Therefore, one aspect of Innis' analysis — the control of space — emerges even more clearly in recent times with the relationship of the idea of Empire to the manifestation of the military-industrial complex as the heart of the contemporary megamachine exposed during the war in Vietnam. This aspect of the
demand for education produced those practical demands which originally caused the emergence of professional faculties interested in the control of empire through law, ecclesiastical qualifications and the like. The other aspect of his interest is related to the original Greek sense of scholia, the academy and the symposia, thus tied to philosophy, literature, poetry, the arts and self-reflection. Control of time or space imply the presence of mechanical models of organization to govern the establishment of communications; the balance of a control of space with a genuine interest in time would produce a more organic or ecological way of approaching the problem of communications — the solution implied by Innis’ analysis of the moment of democracy in the Greek city-state. With relation to Innis’ division, the act of expression provides one path of integration; the act of interpretation another.

Although the original of the humanistic and rhetorical-poetic aspects of knowledge were grounded in poetry and philosophy, these areas of knowledge could equally as well be involved as instruments of governance of the State and/or employed as a persuasive instrument in the interests of the coercion of a temporal power. In either case, as Innis and McLuhan realized, there is a need to consider the appropriate role of the oral and written in relation to the activity of communication. The history of the university reflects this duality for its activities are grounded in part in the expression of the human person to the extent that knowledge is a dialogue, but the rationality of that dialogue and its preservation and transmission came to be the concern of the written text. This conflict goes back to Aristotle’s remarks concerning reading when he attributes a superiority to the reading of a text of a play over seeing a production. The complexity underlying the distinction between oral and written and the way they also need an organic reintegration has only manifested itself in recent times through the insights of Freud, Marx, and Neitzsche. From their work it has been possible to develop a concept of the extended “text” in which not only technologically reproducible forms of communication but especially human interaction can analytically be developed as examples of the text as meaningful action — an argument developed by Burke, Ricouer, Hymes and Bateson. Accompanying this extension has been the development of the university’s interest in the interpretation of meaningful action and in those modes of expression which are audio-visual or gestural as well as speech and writing.

The problem remains, though, that such interests have merely been superimposed on the basic curriculum of the university. The problem still remains that we must now confront the bankruptcy of the humanities and the accompanying bankruptcy of the human sciences and the university itself (which Innis documented early in the post-war period). The study of communication and self-reflection in the university were central problems for both Innis and McLuhan quite simply because they perceived within this relationship there is a possibility for the university to metamorphize itself. With a critique of the status quo it might be possible to reinterpret the conflict between the humanities and the social
sciences as dialectically structured through the consciousness that the education of the intellect must begin with the cultural problem of the priority of a communicative-interpretive human science (the study of communications) as the basis of an education for full participation in a genuine democratic society. Such a communicative-interpretive human science would have to be historical and ecological as well as theoretically directed and it would ultimately also have to be oriented towards practice and cultural production with an over-riding concern with problems of value. It is a devastating comment on what has happened that the study of communications has become divorced from the liberal arts and human sciences, for the problem of working out an appropriate theory of communication is the mirror image, as McLuhan and Innis intuited, of the problem of liberal education and the human sciences in the contemporary university. The reification performed by the technologization of communication which McLuhan tried to reverse in *The Mechanical Bride* before himself embracing such technologization, is the major force inhibiting a reintegration of the liberal program of studies.

The type of program towards which our theoretical movement appears to be pointing could form a project to create a new basis for the liberal arts and humanities. In its development, though, it would also contribute further to the articulation of communication theory, for it would be raising such basic questions as how to revalue and restate the project of Aristotelean interpretation theory that had integrated logic, rhetoric, poetic, politics and ethics. As a curriculum based on communication as symbolic action emerged, our understanding of symbolic action and hence communication would deepen. From Innis' direction such a project could develop a way of insisting on a proper and appropriate political economic and socio-historical base derived from a post-Marxist perspective, while from McLuhan's it could develop a new academic study integrating the history of grammar, rhetoric and poetics as potentially transformable into a general theory of interpretation and communication. Such an activity would relate to a world where the possibilities of reproduction and distribution of symbolic actions are nearly infinite and are recognized as being intricately involved with the total human being and his sensory system as well as the production of sense. From such a perspective the complex problems relating to communications that McLuhan and Innis raised would become more intelligible and form part of an inter-related study of the production of meaning and cultural production. Communication as the basis of a community of understanding, as Dewey argued long ago, would become the focal point for the activity of learning, producing a new sense of the human ecology.

Communications as a discipline is much less important than communications as a way of understanding the problems of thinking and knowing, as Gregory Bateson's work strongly indicates. The realization that the university was a pre-eminent important communication institution whose fundamental curriculum for centuries had encompassed communication theory enabled
McLuhan and Innis, like a few theorists such as Dewey and Burke, to realize that the problems addressed in communication were the fundamental, perennial problems of any humane understanding of human society. Consequently, such a project as Canadian theory points towards ought not to be construed as replacing the activity of communications as a discipline involving the questions of media, technique, artistic creativity and policy making. Rather, it would provide an appropriate theoretical basis for such activity as part of any educated person's life, which is an impecunious assumption of Innis' and quite an explicit one in McLuhan's early work. The development of social and political perimeters for such technological developments as on-line data systems, videotexts, satellites and the like would become part of a dialectical-interpretive dialogue where they would not remain pure reified technological creations. For they would be treated as part of a fully integrated, organic ecological communication process. The communicative activity of social forces and monopolies of control would, then, become recognizable through the analysis of the cultural form of objects developed for use as well as the actual social patterns in which they are actually used.

Innis perceived the university as a place where one has the right and duty not to make up one's mind. Since reflection on communicative-interpretative activity is essential to a university's well-being, this suspension of critical judgements is crucial to preventing premature closure of dialogue. Within its own activities it provides an environment in which to study the complex interactions of human communication, since it itself generates much of the technology, the techniques, the programmers and the producers who create the cultural, artistic, intellectual and social communications networks. At the present moment the university's ability to question and criticize those techniques by transcending the self-interests of its own members has contributed heavily to creating its confused contemporary image. Since the oral tradition which was fundamental to the historic university has no longer been able to counteract the overwhelming influence of the book, in spite of erecting more majestic, temple like structures containing auditorium and lecture halls, it joined with the book in creating libraries and laboratories on an equally mammoth scale. As a collective group the community of universities have attained a monopoly control of the communication of knowledge checked only by the diversity of its members. This check of diversity among universities is counterchecked by the elaborate structure of learned organizations representing disciplines and disciplinary interests, thus reflecting social techniques of professional control.

Innis and McLuhan developed in a period when Canada was still marginal enough to North American mainline activity to permit a perspective of contemplation and critique. This is reflected in many of their own statements concerning the beginning point of their interest in communication. They taught in small universities, not yet fully "professionalized" and still influenced by Scotch and British models. This contributed to the possibility of seeing the fundamental relation of technological communication, mass communication and
human communication within an organic sense of the human as communicator. Recently nationalization has revived a new sense of critique in Canada and possibly it will provide the potentiality of furthering a program which will ultimately unite the perspective of the study of communication as a communicative-interpretive science of symbolic action with the social, historic, political and technical features of communication activity as it has evolved. In that endeavour a new amalgam of the old trivium, a new poetics encompassing all human expression and an interpretive theory of history and society will play a major role — a role enriched and aided by our new understanding, especially through an awareness of our own native peoples of the ethnocentric presuppositions of the approach that we have taken to communication and knowledge. Such an evolution will carry Canadian communication theory into the discussing of an organic theory of communication — a communication ecology — which will place the dialogue in Canada and elsewhere in close rapport, the real gift of the pioneering insights provided by Innis and McLuhan.