Guest Editorial:

Tracing Innis and McLuhan

This theme issue has its origin in a conversation we had in Caffè Art Java on Avenue du Mont Royal in Montréal in early October 2011. As members of the coordinating committee of the joint doctoral program in communication (CODO)—comprising Université de Montréal, Université de Québec à Montréal, and Concordia¹—we were discussing the possibility of holding some sort of intellectual event that could bring together our students, faculty, and the general public to discuss ideas of mutual interest. We were attracted by the prospects of holding a symposium that would explore recent efforts to rethink the relationship between art, technology, and knowledge—with particular reference to the highly dispersed field of communication. This idea was very much in line with the concerns of our joint doctoral program, which encourages students to work at the boundaries between research and research creation.

Our idea was to escape from the confines of the university and have an event that would engage the public in innovative ways. At the same time, this event would have a solid basis in traditional academic concerns with research, theory-building, and intellectual practice. Since issues pertinent to the field of communication were being examined through a series of events marking the 2011 centenary of Marshall McLuhan’s birth, we felt that it would be appropriate and fruitful to organize our own intervention. Although we appreciated the innovative nature of many of the events, we were troubled that their general tenor appeared to be one of fawning celebration rather than critical engagement. Accordingly, we felt that an effective way to interrogate McLuhan would be through revisiting the relationship between his ideas and those of Harold Innis.

It was evident that Innis and McLuhan were increasingly being treated by media scholars as a tandem—as the co-founders of the so-called Toronto School of Communication (Toronto School). Yet more often than not, Innis had become a footnote to McLuhan—a rather dim and fuzzy background to McLuhan’s luminescent foreground. For the most part, the bandwagon of Innis had been hitched to that of McLuhan, and commentators on their respective works have jumped on for the ride.

But to us it seemed more productive to engage with the thought and practice of Innis and McLuhan in a more probing and skeptical fashion. Or to parody Tom Wolfe’s famous pronouncement on McLuhan (1968), “What if they are both wrong?” This concern was reflected in the title we chose for the conference: Innis, McLuhan, and

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the Mass Media: Path to Enlightenment or Dead End? Maybe this is a road that one should not continue to take? Or maybe we should just accept that although the road might be full of nids de poule (potholes), it is still worth the effort to carefully navigate, even if that involves wear and tear on one’s intellectual shock absorbers.2

To explore the relationship between Innis and McLuhan in a fresh way, we felt it was important to frame the event differently, highlighting the performative aspects of theory-making. Accordingly, we arranged to hold the event at la Société des arts technologiques (SAT), located on a strip of Saint-Laurent in downtown Montréal. Founded in 1996 by arts visionaries Luc Courchesne and Monique Savoie, SAT has carved out a unique place for itself within Québec culture. Drawing primarily on local talent, SAT has encouraged innovative collaborative ventures in the area of digital culture, with particular emphasis given to “research, creation, production, presentation, education, and conservation” (SAT, n.d.). Fortuitously, in terms of the event we were planning, SAT had established its own linkage with the legacy of McLuhan. The co-founder of SAT, Luc Courchesne—in collaboration with Mike Wozniewski, Benjamin Bergery, Luc Martinez, and David Duguay—had created an installation entitled Le Salon de Massage McLuhan (McLuhan’s Massage Parlor), which had debuted at the Metropolitan Hotel in Toronto, October 1-2, 2011, as part of the annual Nuit Blanche festival.3 Through the use of “4 large rear projection screens,” a “navigable 3D space” was created, in which material from The Medium Is the Massage (McLuhan, Fiore, & Agel, 1967) was “redeployed.” The swirling 3-D images—controlled by visitors with a hand-held iPhone—were accompanied by a soundscape made up of “elements from the text and from other sound bites illustrating McLuhan’s love for aural culture and the human voice” (Courchesne, 2012, n.d.).

McLuhan’s Massage Parlor was subsequently recreated in the newly constructed Satosphère of SAT, “a massive sound and video dôme … a 360-degree immersive environment equipped with eight video projectors and 157 speakers” (Fadden, n.d.). The first Montréal version of the installation, which ran from November 16 to December 10, 2011, not only served to celebrate the 15th anniversary of SAT, but also commemorated the birth of McLuhan (Lancement, 2011). Indeed, in addition to offering visitors the total immersive experience within The Medium Is the Massage afforded by the dome, the chefs of SAT’s Foodlab created a special menu for the occasion on the new McLuhanesque Sensorium floor of the complex, contributing to the multisensory experience.

A conference on McLuhan and Innis held in conjunction with the remounting of McLuhan’s Massage Parlor within the Satosphère struck us as an appropriate way to engage with the work of McLuhan and Innis, adding a reflexive and performative dimension that is usually absent from academic events. Accordingly, we decided that our symposium would be held on the main floor of SAT, followed by a keynote within the massage parlour of McLuhan on a subject related to McLuhan. After a good deal of consultation, Graham Larkin, whom we had first invited, suggested that we contact Jeffrey Schnapp of Harvard University, who had taken part in some of the McLuhan events of the previous year. Professor Schnapp kindly accepted our invitation to make a keynote presentation about McLuhan within the massage parlour and was very enthusiastic to do so.4
His interest in the event was likely rooted in the fact that he had just co-authored a book (Schnapp & Michaels, 2012) examining the innovative (and iconoclastic) effort of McLuhan, Jerome Agel, and Quentin Fiore to produce a new form of mass-produced paperback (The Medium Is the Massage) for the “Electric Information Age,” which served as the prototype for “a distinctive new graphics-rich, montage-based genre of bookmaking that still resonates today” (back cover, Schnapp & Michaels, 2012). The book by Schnapp and Michaels did more than simply recount the history of this publishing phenomenon. Gesturing to their text’s subtitle, “An inventory of effects,” the book provides its own inventory of the concatenation of impulses and effects that began to gather force in the early 1960s. Indeed, pushing this self-reference in a slightly different direction, the book had been designed to approximate the electric age paperback with its modest size, its jolting cover, and its creative use of fonts—in addition to its affordable price.

Our event offered Professor Schnapp the opportunity to take his penchant for reflexivity even further, by examining McLuhan’s Medium Is the Massage as the prototype of the electric information-age paperback, surrounded and suffused by the very text that he was discussing. As he recounted shortly after the experience, “It was fantastic. I couldn’t have dreamed up a better space to give a talk in. As soon as I saw the space I decided to abandon the written talk that I had with me” (Schnapp, 2012). In effect, Schnapp jettisoned his prepared address in favour of a more spontaneous performance. A few hours before the event, he had met with Luc Courchesne and saw the Massage Parlor installation for the first time. Immediately, a technical problem presented itself. Schnapp had prepared a series of PowerPoint images that were to serve as points of reference for his comments. However, one needed to find a way to integrate these with the images produced by the projectors. A solution was found, and the two sets of images (one two-dimensional and the other three-dimensional) were integrated seamlessly. He and Courchesne quickly established how they would work together. Schnapp would serve as tour guide for our voyage through the electric information age paperback, while Courchesne played the role of navigator cum bus driver for the excursion.

Schnapp began with an overview of how The Medium Is the Massage could be seen as a prototype for a new media genre, the electric information-age paperback that had emerged in the 1960s. He gave particular attention to the broader context to the development of this form of publication and its relationship to a range of phenomena and practices, including advertising, shifts in graphic design, celebrity culture, the “me” generation, and world expositions. After having carefully situated The Medium Is the Massage in relation to its broader milieu, Schnapp embarked on a “tour” of the text. Drawing on his vast knowledge of the material, and working closely in tandem with Courchesne, he provided detailed and nuanced commentary on the ghostlike images that had been inventoried in the swirling three-dimensional representation of The Medium Is the Massage. In some sense, the event could be likened to a seance, harkening back to the Ouija board craze of the late 1960s, after Parker Brothers began to market the pastime to a mass audience. In a manner akin to a medium, Schnapp adroitly gave life and meaning to the figures and phenomena dancing in the space of the Satosphère, whether by zooming in on a massive fingerprint, explaining why...
W.C. Fields had a foot under his nose, or probing how the text relentlessly addressed its intended audience, namely the YOU of mass-market advertising.

The sense of taking part in a form of educational seance was inflected by the planetarium-like ambience of the Satosphère. However, rather than viewing the heavens move across the two-dimensional space of a local late-1960s centennial project from regimented plush theatre seats, the members of the audience, reclining on haphazardly dispersed couches, found that their entire bodies were immersed in the immediate object of their experience. Above all, they were confronted with an imposing verticality, which gave a sense of authority to the shifting and evanescent text. In line with the title of the McLuhan/Fiore/Agel joint production, the audience’s experience of the text was largely corporeal rather than informational; in McLuhan’s parlance it could be better likened to unwittingly undergoing a massage rather than purposively receiving a message. The bewildering array of images and fragments that bombarded the sensoria of the audience members was inherently bound up with their immediate effects. Cut loose from their original moorings in a linear printed product, the vacillating images operated kinesthetically on the bodies of the audience, inducing disorientation or even mild vertigo.

Through the deft teamwork of Schnapp and Courchesne, the participants were offered the possibility of experiencing the text as a living organism. While the entire volume of The Medium Is the Massage was not immediately present in the space of the Satosphère, when asked by Schnapp to make a particular image visible, Courchesne was able to quickly bring it forth, displaying it in the size and location appropriate to the point that Schnapp was making. The audience thus witnessed both the arrival of the image and its return to a cyber-dwelling that one could only imagine. One had the sense of moving through a largely unknown terrain populated by somewhat familiar beings and phenomena. This was made possible by an experienced navigator working with a highly knowledgeable guide, both very familiar with the particular inventory of texts and images.

Dovetailing with the performance of Schnapp and Courchesne, and in the spirit of McLuhan and his collaborators, the articles in this collection seek to take stock of the current epoch, with particular reference to the ideas of Innis and McLuhan. In the same way that the seminal mass-circulation “Electric Age” paperback of the late 1960s was probed for its meaning and significance, the authors have explored the contours of knowledge about Innis and McLuhan in the early twenty-first century, with a view to charting some new directions that scholarship about their contributions might take. While the final two articles (those of David Jaclin and Darren Wershler) examine particular aspects of McLuhan’s work, the first three articles (those of Gaëtan Tremblay, Luiz Martino, and William J. Buxton) address the extent to which McLuhan and Innis should be viewed as a tandem, whose ideas formed the core of what has come to be called the Toronto School of Communication. Each author approaches this question from a different perspective, but collectively they cover a broad range of issues related to the contributions of the two thinkers, identifying possible future directions for reflecting on the Toronto School of Communication. Gaëtan Tremblay’s article, “From Marshall McLuhan to Harold Innis or From the Global Village to the World Empire,”
provides an account of his own engagement with McLuhan and with Innis, emphasizing what he has found valuable or lacking in each. He notes that he first came across McLuhan’s writings as a student of sociology at Université Laval and encountered Innis’ works somewhat later through his involvement in the formation of the Canadian Communication Association. While acknowledging the extent to which he has found the ideas of McLuhan to be exciting and provocative, he underscores his reservations about a number of aspects of McLuhan’s project. In particular, he takes issue both with McLuhan’s views on perception and his tendency to work within a technological-determinist framework. He also finds a number of McLuhan’s key concepts to be inadequate. Notable in this regard is his conception of a global village, which, according to Tremblay, is based on a number of highly untenable assumptions about the nature of village life. He is much more attracted by the historical approach developed by Innis, which is in line with his own interest in how macro societies operate. All the same, he finds in Innis some of the same technological determinism that is present in McLuhan, which detracts from Innis’ ability to shed light on issues of agency. Finally, he concludes with an assessment of how the ideas of Innis and McLuhan were rooted in their respective contexts (in relation to other currents of thought) and the bearing of these ideas on contemporary issues such as war and cultural imperialism.

William J. Buxton’s article, “The Rise of McLuhanism, The Loss of Innis-sense: Rethinking the Origins of the Toronto School of Communication,” approaches the two thinkers from a history-of-ideas standpoint, exploring why Innis’s substantial work in communications (undertaken in the last dozen years of his life) was virtually ignored initially, whereas McLuhan’s venture into the field gained early and lasting recognition. He argues that this disparity cannot be attributed to the relative merits of their contributions to the study of communications, but rather to the relative availability of their texts and to their respective communication practices. His article begins with a discussion of how McLuhan, in the 1950s, drew upon Innis in his efforts to establish the field of communication culminating in McLuhan’s recognition as an authority in the field by the end of decade. It examines why a field of communication emerging directly out of Innis’s work never materialized, whereas McLuhan was extremely successful in establishing a widely recognized approach to communication, bound up with Innis as a precursor. McLuhan’s appropriation of Innis, Buxton argues, while successful as a strategy for giving the field of communication credibility, came at the expense of distorting aspects of Innis’ work in communications, while totally neglecting others. After indicating some of the main deficiencies in McLuhan’s treatment of Innis—drawing largely on the works of the latter that McLuhan ignored—Buxton suggests that the performative aspects of their respective communicative practices also were quite incommensurable. His article concludes with a plea to decouple the Innis/McLuhan tandem, which would allow us to not only better understand the contributions of the two thinkers, but also to make better sense of what has been called the Toronto School of Communication.

Luiz Martino’s article, “Le Concept de Moyen de Communication dans l’École de Toronto,” examines the thought of Innis and McLuhan largely from a theoretical and epistemological perspective. He addresses the fundamental question of the extent to
which the work of Innis and McLuhan constituted a core of ideas for what has come to be called the Toronto School of Communication. In his view, the two thinkers were linked by a similar epistemological focus, namely their use of *medium* as a key concept. To this end, he examines how the notion of *medium* was deployed in the writings of Innis and McLuhan, respectively, with a view to understanding how this term served as a common point in their thinking. He points out that while Innis never directly provided a definition of *medium*, he nonetheless suggested that it represented a conjunction between a material object and human consciousness. This led him to make claims about how the physical properties of *media* exercised an influence on civilizations, resulting in biases either in time or in space. All the same, Innis was careful to recognize that the nature of these influences was very much shaped by particular contextual factors. Martino goes on to argue that McLuhan was in basic agreement with Innis about the importance of the material properties of a *medium*. But according to Martino, McLuhan took this materialism in a different direction by stressing how *media* could be seen as extensions of human beings that at the same time had an impact upon the human sensorium. He also was able to expand on issues about technology that had largely been unexamined in Innis. Through his fine-grained analysis, then, Martino is able to trace continuities in the thought of Innis and McLuhan, while at the same time acknowledging a number of theoretical and epistemological ruptures that separated the two thinkers.

**David Jaclin**’s article, “Beastness is our Culture: Le legs de McLuhan aux Études Animales,” also discusses the McLuhanian concept of *medium*, but in a different direction. Instead of focusing on *media* as extensions providing a conjunction between material objects *qua* transmission apparatus and human consciousness, as most media studies do, he interrogates the potential legacy (and uses) of this particular concept for Animal Studies. Through a variety of literary devices—that, we hope, Marshall McLuhan would have enjoyed—Jaclin returns to the conceptual dimension of *medium* understood as *milieu*, for a conceptual extension of media studies as ecological studies (and not only as media ecology, or in an extended sense).

In framing his article around Jean de la Fontaine’s version of *The Fox and the Goat* fable and attempting to outline the principles of what, playing on words, he calls a “Marshall Art,” Jaclin recovers McLuhan’s style of formal analysis and applies it to “organic media,” such as technologically modified animals. This might be understood as yet another case of a form of technological determinism that was so often reproached by McLuhan himself. However, it seems to us that Jaclin’s article is a fine illustration of another form of analysis, one that requires an understanding of different forms of causality than that of the overextended cause-and-effect.

Indeed, Jaclin’s contribution to the present collection epitomizes herein what Lance Strate (2011) noted when he wrote that “[f]or media ecologists and biologists alike, we understand that that kind of language [the language of cause-and-effect or efficient cause] is a form of shorthand, and a kind of poetry, used to represent much more complex processes” (p. x). Like him, we recommend that one read Jaclin’s article with another kind of causality in mind: that of “formal cause …, the causality of emergent properties, the causality that media ecologists often have in mind when we con-
sider the impact of technological change on individuals and societies, on communication, consciousness, and culture” (p. x).

The link between McLuhan and poetics also figures prominently in Darren Wershler’s article, “Marshall McLuhan and the Economies of Knowledge.” In this case, however, the place of poetry in the work of McLuhan is examined through the lens of his citation practices (an important—yet very much neglected—aspect of his work). Wershler frames his analysis in terms of “knowledge economies,” which involve the making of meaning in particular discursive fields through “a set of overlapping systems of production, circulation and consumption, all of which are constantly competing (and occasionally cooperating) with each other.” After providing a detailed and nuanced overview of how the knowledge economies approach has been deployed—as well as inflected by contemporary circulation theory—Wershler turns his attention to the current conflicts between “academic-citation economies” and “copyright economies.” As embodied in differing copyright protocols, this can be viewed as a struggle between a market-based economy founded in permission to use (most commonly accompanied by a fee) and an acknowledgement of use (with no fee usually demanded)—associated with the academy.

After carefully examining a number of the major works produced by McLuhan, Wershler concludes that this body of work cannot be easily located within an academic-citation economy.

To be sure, while some of these texts have bibliographies, the citational information they provide is quite minimal and at odds with the standards usually expected within the academic world. Wershler suggests that McLuhan’s lack of allegiance to the academic-citation economy could be attributed—at least in part—to his willingness to make forays “into a range of different knowledge economies (including, but certainly not limited to, North American scholarly publishing, avant-garde poetics, celebrity television and radio culture, business writing, and Catholic theology).” At first glance, this might suggest that Communication Studies, as grounded in the academic traditions of citing, should be more leery of McLuhan’s contributions (whose point of reference was poetry rather than social science). However, Wershler contends that it would be more productive to view the “restrictive economy” of academic-citation economy as imbricated within what the Toronto Research Group (TRG) termed a “general economy”—characterized by “the provisionality of thoughts inevitably subjected to historical forces, socio-cultural change and the fluctuating relations of cultural disciplines.” Wershler argues that this hybrid approach has strong affinities with that of McLuhan, which allows us to better understand how his citation practices resonate with those of others working within the field of Communication Studies.

The two final articles share in common a point of reference with McLuhan’s later writings (post–Gutenberg Galaxy and Understanding Media). While Jaclin emphasizes the organicist elements of McLuhan’s thought and their resonance with the emergent field of Animal Studies, Wershler notes that McLuhan (at least momentarily) turned his back on “academic citation economy” in favour of a variation of a “copyright economy.” In some sense, these two aspects of McLuhan’s practice can be viewed as two sides of the same coin—a die that had been cast by his co-authored work, The Medium Is the Massage. As we have seen, this work signalled a shift in emphasis from the trans-
mission of ideas by the media to the audience to the immersion of the audience in the media (as revealed in the replacement of “message” by “massage”). As a variant of the electric information paperback genre, the book could be seen as an integral part of corporate culture, as it were, massaging the collective sensoria of the mass audience immersed within it. At the same time, it sought to place that audience in an emergent organic world, characterized by the ecological interplay of media and other various contemporary phenomena.

While the articles of Jaclin and Wershler address issues largely related to McLuhan, they have a great bearing on how we understand the connection between McLuhan and Innis, as examined in the articles by Tremblay, Buxton, and Martino. By virtue of a standpoint grounded in the writings of the later McLuhan (suffused with ecological and organic themes), they converge with a number of themes that emerge in the first three articles. These include Tremblay’s discussion of global interdependence, Buxton’s examination of celebrity culture, and Martino’s analysis of how McLuhan built upon and extended Innis’ concept of the “medium.” That the articles in this issue can chart some new areas of inquiry in relation to the thought of Innis and McLuhan is testimony to the depth and richness of their respective œuvres.

Acknowledgments

Given that the articles in this issue would never have materialized had it not been for the conference “Innis, McLuhan, and the Mass Media: Path to Enlightenment or Dead End?” held at la Société des arts technologiques on April 25, 2012, we gratefully acknowledge all those whose help and support contributed to the success of the event. Josée Duranleau, the administrative assistant for the Joint Ph.D. Program in Communication, rendered invaluable service in preparing the programs for the event. Jeffrey Schnapp and Luc Courchesne teamed up to provide a memorable keynote performance, which more than confirmed the fact that the insights of both McLuhan and Innis are alive and well. In addition to thanking Gaëtan Tremblay, David Jaclin, Darren Wershler, and Luiz Martino, we wish to extend our gratitude to all of the others who took part in our two sessions: Oumar Kane, Lorna Roth, Sandra Gabriele, Shirley Roburn, and Christina Haralanova—as well as our colleagues, students, and members of the public who kept our panellists and keynote presenters on their toes. We thank Monique Savoie and Alex Auche at SAT for their hospitality as well as the congenial staff and technicians, who made sure that the conference proceeded without a hitch or a glitch. Fabien Deglise, Alexandre Laurin, Jean-Hughes Roy, Sarah Choukah, Shelagh Peden, Tom Peacock, Michael Dorland, and Scott Prentice helped to get the word out about the conference—on embarrassingly short notice. Thanks also go to Graham Larkin, who put us in touch with Jeffrey Schnapp.

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Notes

1. Created in 1987, the bilingual Joint Ph.D. Program in Communication combines the talents of some 60 professors, 150 students, and the staff at the three institutions.

2. To this end, the first session addressed the issue of whether Innis and McLuhan should be decoupled. Were Innis and McLuhan made for one another or was this one of the oddest of odd couples? The second session was focused on McLuhan. It examined whether or not McLuhan could be productively probed, in the same manner that he continually probed his own environment—exploring rather than explaining.

3. Luc Courchesne is a professor of design at Université de Montréal, where he teaches media and experiential design. Over the past 30 years he has made a major contribution to the emergence of media arts. His early work on interactive portraiture and landscape contributed to a revolution in these genres with his installations and “panoscopic” images, which transform spectators into visitors, actors, and inhabitants of his experiential crafts. His work is part of major collections in North America, Europe, and Asia and has been shown extensively in galleries and museums worldwide, including Sydney’s Art Gallery of New South Wales, New York’s Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo’s InterCommunication Center (ICC), Paris’ La Villette, Karlsruhe’s ZKM Medienmuseum, Montréal’s Musée d’art contemporain, the National Gallery of Canada, Barcelona’s Fundación “la Caixa,” and Beijing’s National Art Museum of China.

4. Jeffrey T. Schnapp is a Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard University, where he also teaches on the faculty of the Department of Architecture at the Graduate School of Design and serves as faculty co-director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society. In February 2011, he co-founded a new laboratory under the aegis of the Berkman Center: metaLAB (at) Harvard. Though primarily anchored in the field of Italian studies (before moving to Harvard in 2011, he occupied the Pierotti Chair of Italian Studies at Stanford), Professor Schnapp has played a pioneering role in several areas of transdisciplinary research and has been at the forefront of a new wave of digital humanities work. His research interests extend from antiquity to the present, encompassing the material history of literature, the history of twentieth-century architecture and design, and the cultural history of science and engineering. Trained as a Romance linguist, Schnapp is the author or editor of 20 books and over 100 essays. His book *Crowds* received the Modernist Studies Association prize for best book of 2006.

5. Schnapp’s ideas, as presented in his lecture and in his text, are discussed in more detail in Buxton’s article in this issue.

6. Buxton, Tremblay, and Martino had previously presented different versions of these articles at the 34th Brazilian Congress of Communication Sciences (INTERCOM), held at Universidade Católica de Pernambuco, Recife, Brazil, in September 2011. Reflecting the growing worldwide interest in Innis and McLuhan, two special plenary sessions at the meetings were dedicated to discussion of their ideas.

7. A note on French semantics and spelling: for the two articles in French in the present issue, we have tried to normalize the spelling of the family of words relating to *medium*; hence we use *medium* (pl. *media*) for the most encompassing concept, in italics, from the Latin *medium*, “milieu, means, intermediary”; *média* (pl. *médias*) from the English “mass media”; and *média* (pl. *médiums*) for “an individual held to be a channel of communication between the earthly world and a world of spirits” (*Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, 1983).

References


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