Guest Editorial

The Francophone School of Communication and Information

In 2012, Gaëtan Tremblay retired, at least institutionally. He has, in fact, continued his research activities, as shown by the recent UNESCO report Renewing the Knowledge Societies Vision: Towards Knowledge Societies for Peace and Sustainable Development, co-edited with Robin Mansell (Tremblay & Mansell, 2013a, 2013b). To celebrate Gaëtan’s retirement from the Université du Québec à Montréal, the Centre de recherche interuniversitaire sur la communication, l’information et la société (CRICIS) organized an international conference in Montréal in May 2013 around the theme “Where is the critical in communication?” (Kane & George, 2013). Michael Dorland was one of several colleagues invited to speak about Gaëtan’s career, and it was at that moment that the idea came to the two of us to propose a special issue of the Canadian Journal of Communication organized around questions that Gaëtan Tremblay had concerned himself with throughout the years. Such an issue seemed even more pertinent as Tremblay is a Québécois communication researcher with undoubtedly one of the highest levels of production and dissemination both here and far beyond our borders. An open individual, he engaged with the entirety of Canada—while the “two solitudes” (MacLennan, 1945) continued to rage on—especially when it came to research. One example is when he became the inaugural president of the Canadian Communication Association in 1980. However, his openness was far more broad than Canada. This can be seen when one reads the rich content of his academic production, but more directly through his mastery of four languages: French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Portuguese, for instance, he learned in the space of a few short months in order to give a course in Brazil in the local language.

Logical as we are, Michael Dorland and I began to dream up this issue by asking our “new retiree” to write a text about his own career, a proposition that was immediately accepted but which—as he explains—was not exactly easy. Tremblay himself qualifies it as “intellectual striptease.” However, we see it more as an exercise in positive reflexivity organized around a life trajectory through which Tremblay puts special, though not exclusive, attention on his research activities. This is a trajectory he considers as “always more or less the result of a junction between a personal research program and solicitations from the community within which he is evolving, individual choices, and socio-historical constraints.”

Tremblay’s presence, though, does not end with his text in this issue of the CJC. In fact, building the issue around him has also provided the occasion to put forward a synthesis of various research themes undertaken in the French language. It is not haphazard that all contributors to this issue are researchers associated with the re-
search centre that Tremblay founded under the acronym GRICIS (initially, Groupe de recherche sur les industries culturelles et l’informatisation sociale, later becoming the Groupe de recherche interdisciplinaire sur la communication, l’information et la société, and now finally institutionally recognized as a research centre). These researchers include Evan Light, who translated the entirety of these texts from French to English and whom we would like to thank here for his excellent work. We all understand how the translation process is a complex exercise, starting with the reality that, quite often, the explanation of something—initially understood by the authors to be easily comprehensible—may, through the process of translation, become more difficult to understand. The successful completion of this bilingual issue was chiefly made possible through a grant obtained by GRICIS, which was augmented by the generous support of the Canadian Journal of Communication. Readers can find more information on GRICIS in the articles by Gaëtan Tremblay and myself.

Three articles in this issue address the subject of cultural industries, and this seems logical given that this subject occupied a good part of Tremblay’s career. My article is a return to work conducted at the end of the 1970s, during which time cooperative efforts by French and Québécois research teams led to the emergence of a “theory of cultural industries,” although it was not initially identified as such. After presenting the context of its emergence, I explore two issues that have long been, and continue to be, hotly debated: knowing what subject the theory of “cultural industries” is concerned with, and the place of the concept of “models” (also referred to as “social logics”) in this theory. This second dimension becomes even more interesting as a uniquely Francophone specificity has developed out of the cooperative work mentioned earlier, cooperation that continues to provoke interesting debate. One such instance occurred in May 2013, regarding the continued relevance (or not) of “creative industries” during a colloquium organized in Paris around the theme “Creative industries: A major turning point?”

The question regarding creative industries is, in fact, the central theme of Philippe Bouquillion’s text. While Gaëtan Tremblay (2008) developed the thesis according to which the expression “creative industries” incorporates a strong ideological dimension, Bouquillion attempts to analyze the extent to which this concept and that of “creative economy”—both originating in Anglophone work—may be useful to Francophone researchers, considering that we operate in a context marked by the weight of “older critical work that is solidly anchored in the concept of culture industries.” Herein, Bouquilllon sees a certain Francophone originality, bringing to light the fact that the expressions mentioned above cannot be approached from a critical perspective by authors who have dedicated much of their time to dreaming up the “theory” (or perhaps “theories,” in view of diverging perspectives) of cultural industries. While we may consider the “hard core” of the theory to be sufficiently shared among research conducted on both sides of the Atlantic, Philippe Bouquillion believes the differences in perspective of some authors are serious enough to speak of “cultural industries theories” in the plural.

The cultural industries triptych is completed by a text from Marc Ménard dedicated to the concept of the filière industrielle or “industrial channel.” After reminding
us that this concept originates in the world of economics, he sets out to explain its use in the domain of culture, information, and communication, and to show to what extent this concept is one of particularly French origin. He notes that this concept “is conceived as an organized set of relationships (that is to say, a system endowed with its own functions) and as the range of strategic actions on the part of involved actors,” is unique to French-language research, and that there is no corresponding English word (“value chain” is proposed as a modest attempt). That said, Ménard concludes by stating that the concept remains pertinent for its heuristic potential more than ever before:

Even more so than before, we should link the industrial channel approach to the territorialized network actor (for example, the concentration of cultural firms and organizations in urban centres) and the de-territorialized inter-sector network actor (the globalization of structures and relationships between actors that has been spun forth by Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Google, Facebook, et cetera). (pp. 84–85)

As we can see, Francophone research on cultural industries has given rise to important lines of questioning and analysis. It has done so while being an integral part of work undertaken in the political economy of communication tradition, as shown by various projects.

However, Gaëtan Tremblay was not only interested in cultural industries during his academic career; he also plunged into the concept of “public space” (2007), which has gained much attention over the years, notably in the field of communication studies. This can be explained, in part, because it hides several meanings, including an underlying tension, as it refers to both a philosophical category—the Weberian “ideal-type”—and a concept to focus upon, and thus operationalize, in the social sciences and humanities, including in communication studies. Among other places, this tension makes itself known in Jürgen Habermas’ *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). France Aubin, in her article, focuses upon work done on the concept of public space, using occurrences in “real-life” society as a starting point. She shows an interest for incorporating work from outside the Francophone sphere, especially that of Nancy Fraser. It is important to note the timeline of translations made of Habermas’ tome, published in its original German in 1962. Scholars had to wait till 1978 for a French-language version to appear, and thus it is not by chance that the large majority of Francophone work around the concept of the public sphere was developed afterwards. Criticisms of this concept equally burst forth, although the context had changed significantly over the course of 16 years. Finally, Aubin shows that “an engagement with the question of public space can be observed since the end of the 1990s in several disciplines concerned with social movements and democracy.”

While the question of information and communication technologies (ICTs) as understood from a “digital” or “network” perspective occupies a location in Aubin’s public space discussion of the Internet, it plays a central role in Fabien Granjon’s article, in which he approaches these technologies from a “social use” perspective. In France, the history of this field of research hearkens back to the early 1980s, beginning with, for example, research on the video cassette recorder and Minitel, one of the ancestors of
today’s Internet. This Francophone work was an opportunity to focus on user practices at a time when media reception was the rising star of the Anglophone world, for example in cultural studies. Both bodies of work come together around the thought of Michel de Certeau (1990), who juxtaposed “a rationalized type of production, as expansionist as it was centralized, noisy, and spectacular,” with “another type of production, qualified as ‘consumption,’” which it in fact used “to trick,” “to disperse,” “to silence,” to make “quasi-invisible” this other type of production, drawing attention to itself through “ways of using products imposed by a dominant economic system” (1990, p. XXXVII). Consequently, de Certeau sought to study ways of doing—the title of one of his most essential books—which “constitute the thousands of practices by which users reappropriate organized space through techniques of sociocultural production” (1990, p. XL). This is precisely where researchers interested in the uses of ICTs have found inspiration for their work by mobilizing, most notably, the concept of autonomy (Jouët, 2000). Having spent the 1990s working on strategies within culture, information, and communication industries, Gaëtan Tremblay recalled that work on the cultural industries had a tendency to consider the question of social uses with regard to “the strategies of industrial actors” (Tremblay, 1997, p. 21). He thus believed that autonomy, ideal as it may be, can only be relative. In his article here, Fabien Granjon examines the genealogy of French research—it is important to mention Serge Proulx, who initiated a large number of research projects in Québec (Proulx, Millerand, & Rueff, 2010)—before proposing lines of reflection concerning the pertinence of approaching these uses from critical perspectives. Here, too, it is important to understand the relativity of user autonomy.

Finally, Oumar Kane brings us out of Franco/Québécois debates and beyond North America and Europe by inviting us to a reading of communication research in Africa. His text, in fact, begins by envisioning the impossibility of engaging with a subject of such a vast scale and proposes to limit his discussion to West Africa. While particular attention is given to French-language work, Kane equally engages with English-language work in the region. With these bearings, Kane posits that the field of communication tends to approach the link between communication and development from an occidental perspective and that the coupling “communication and development” continues to play to “a very important social engineering role throughout the African continent.” However, he also writes of the development of a critical approach to thought developed by African philosophers of communication (Nyamnjoh, 2010) who are more attentive to “the socio-cultural realities that are central to African forms of communication and symbolic production.” The author reminds us here that behind the oft-invoked notion of universality, there exists a fundamental imposition of occidental values, norms, and ways of doing that has taken place over centuries. Can we, all the same, envision a reconciliation between universality and diversity, that which Édouard Glissant (1997) proposed with the term “diversality”? During that same period, Gaëtan Tremblay (1996) proposed that we recognize the existence of a dialectic of “virtues that respect both the universal and the particular” by asking the following question: “Does not emancipation, which should spur on cultural development, affirm the fundamental equality of all, the recognition of differences, and the quest for better conditions, permitting the blossoming of one and all (of groups as well as individuals)?” (p. 124).
Before leaving you, dear reader, with this body of work, I would like to spend a few moments on a characteristic that cuts across all of them—their manifestly critical orientation. This, too, is one of the important dimensions of the career of our colleague Gaëtan Tremblay. In effect, the various authors collected here systematically develop a practice of critical thought. The critical is always present in the epistemological orientation of their work. Time and again they step back to have a broader view of the state of affairs, whether it be the theory of cultural industries (George); the relationships between cultural industries, creative industries, and the Web (Bouquillon); the concept of industrial channels in cultural sectors (Ménard); the concept of public space (Aubin); the sociology of ICT uses (Granjon); or communication studies in Africa (Kane). This body of work is well inscribed within the tradition of the “‘critique of normal science’, a critique of science that refuses to be self-questioning, to interrogate its own history, that isolates itself in its practices and never questions whatever it is that guides it in a given direction” (Beaud, 1997, p. 24). Such work is critical of science but also critical of the world, “because we can never really enter into the future so much as make every moment the minute examination of the past” (Balibar, 1992, p. 13). Here again, all of these texts have traversed numerous perspectives, but have always focused upon the predominance of relationships of domination: between cultural industry actors, participants in public space, between ICT users, and between the “North” and the “South” (and perhaps it would make more sense to speak of “Norths” and “Souths”).

In the end, Gaëtan Tremblay invites us to think anew in dialectical terms. Inscribing his work in a critical perspective means simultaneously engaging in this critique of science, understood to be the production of an epistemological work founded on the practice of doubt and (auto)critique, and engaging in a critique of the world based on the disclosure of relationships of power and domination as well as the actions of social subjects in support of their proper emancipation. From this place, one can come to think at once about domination, economic and social inequalities, and alienation, but also of resistance, emancipation, social change, the power to act, and empowerment.

Wouldn’t it be nice to combine the mobilizing power of these varied concepts rather than treat them each separately, to permanently and continually address concepts that lead to the reproduction of the status quo and those that lead to positive change, to draw a road map of possible futures? (George, 2014, n.p.)

References


Kane, Oumar, & George, Éric (Eds.). (2013). *Où (en) est la critique en communication ?* Actes du colloque organisé par le Centre de recherche GRICIS, Montréal, les 7 et 8 mai 2012. URL: http://gricis.uqam.ca/activites/colloques/article/ou-en-est-la-critique-en [22 novembre 2013].


Éric George, Université du Québec à Montréal