Research in Brief

Innis’ Great Transformation: Staples Thesis/Medium Theory

Robert E. Babe
University of Western Ontario

ABSTRACT Harold Innis inaugurated his research into Canadian economic history (staples studies) to counteract the purportedly universalist claims of mainstream economics; he believed the mainstream “justified” exploitation of the developing world by the wealthiest countries. Conversely, he sought out universalist principles in his media/communication work in order to counteract omnipresent misunderstanding in the world; he hoped to establish thereby a common ground conducive to world peace. The dialectic or contradiction of relativism/universalism in Innis’ two major inquiries has hitherto remained unrecognized, and constitutes the focus of this article.

KEYWORDS Innis; Dialectic; Staples; Economic theory; Medium theory

RÉSUMÉ Harold Innis a entamé sa recherche sur l’histoire économique canadienne (théorie des principales ressources) pour contrer les postulats supposément universels de la science économique traditionnelle; il croyait que le courant traditionnel « justifiait » l’exploitation des pays en voie de développement par les pays les plus riches. Lui au contraire cherchait dans son travail sur les médias et la communication des principes universels qui supplanteraient cette incompréhension répandue dans le monde. Il espérait ainsi établir un terrain d’entente propice à favoriser la paix mondiale. La dialectique ou contradiction entre le relativisme et l’universalisme dans les deux enquêtes majeures effectuées par Innis n’a pas jusqu’à présent été reconnue, et constitue le sujet de cet article.

MOTS CLÉS Innis; Dialectique; Principales ressources; Théorie économique; Théorie des médias

According to his biographer and friend Donald Creighton, Harold Innis’ first decade of scholarship at the University of Toronto (1920–1930) was filled with frustration and loneliness (Creighton, 1978): he was the only one on staff researching Canadian economic history; for example, and his book on the fur trade (finally appearing in 1930) had been rejected by several publishers. Moreover, he was then calling for a new economics to counteract the hegemony of the economics establishment; hardly an enterprise endearing him to the economics mainstream. Indeed, he expressed deep admiration for ostracized economist Thorstein Veblen, a position sure to lose him

Robert E. Babe is Professor of Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario. Email: rbabe@uwo.ca.

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friends and antagonize people (Innis, 1979b). By the early to mid-1930s, however, Innis’ status within the Canadian scholarly establishment had changed dramatically, and by 1940, if not before, he was widely regarded as Canada’s pre-eminent scholar.

One might well ask, therefore, why Innis, at the very apex of his career, would choose in the 1940s to again become “lonely and intellectually isolated” (Watson, 2006, p. 167), again to inaugurate and develop a line of research that few understood or appreciated, to risk ostracism by disputing axioms held as inviolable by the international scholarly elite. Numerous commentators have wrestled with these questions. Here I begin by reviewing briefly, but critically, some of that literature. This critical review and commentary will help delineate relations between Innis’ staples thesis and his medium theory, and also help identify (in Innis’ eyes) the limitations (or biases) of the former.

**Commentators’ speculations**

**A complicated and contradictory person**

Eric Havelock scanned the surface of Innis’ psychological makeup and concluded that Innis “was a complicated and even contradictory person” (1982, p. 17), hinting perhaps that Innis was not quite stable. Maybe that was why he risked throwing so much away! Havelock described Innis also as “the radical conservative of his day” (p. 22), as the proverbial insider-outsider who steadfastly sought after and attained insider status early and at mid-career, but who seemingly repudiated all that in choosing, in his final decade, to again become an outsider.

Regarding Innis’ emotional stability, or lack thereof, one could indeed point to Innis’ pessimism, to his tendency to depression, and to his “mental breakdown” of 1937 (Creighton, 1978; Watson, 2006). Regarding his purportedly overweening ambition, however, Havelock’s conjectures seem totally off-target. It was not self-aggrandizement or lust for status, as Havelock contends, that drove Innis in his early and mid-career. Innis did choose in the 1920s, after all, to inaugurate, in isolation, a new and countervailing approach to economics; he fervently berated the economics mainstream for being (as he saw it) an instrument for economic exploitation (among other non desiderata); he resigned, and later again threatened to resign, from his position at the University of Toronto—in the latter instance to support another outsider, Frank Underhill (with whom he disagreed fervently); he resigned from an office with the Royal Society of Canada on a matter of principle (Creighton, 1980); he continually made disparaging remarks, from at least the mid-1930s, regarding not just the competence but also the integrity of governmental and scholarly elites—including university presidents and other administrators. These are not the behaviours or strategies of one lusting after status or power.

Far more convincing than Havelock’s conjectures is the proposition that throughout his career, Innis consistently wrote what he thought was most truthful. His pessimism and skepticism enabled (and indeed perhaps required) him to see matters in ways not conforming to the mainstream. Innis was an “inner-directed,” honest scholar to begin with, and he remained just that until the very end. He eventually received the approval and praise of elites (particularly in Canada), true, but this was due to the
originality and integrity of his staples work (which, incidentally, aligned at the time with the interests of domestic politicians and civil servants intent on furthering Canadian independence).

That said, the question still remains: Why would Innis feel the need to change the focus (and indeed the very ontology) of his scholarship, to move from staples to media, and thereby risk misunderstanding and non-acceptance?

Testing for bias
In 1952, Innis’ colleague, Tom Easterbrook, addressed the American Economics Association to honour the recently deceased Innis. Easterbrook proposed that Innis’ shift from staples to communication/media entailed “no suggestion of a break or loss of continuity or of interests” (1953a, pp. 8–9). At another commemoration, Easterbrook made a similar pronouncement: “Although it is possible to mark out some [phases] in Innis’s work, there is at no point any suggestion of a break or a radical shift in his mode of approach to national or general economic history” (1953b, p. 292).

To support these claims, Easterbrook noted (correctly) that Innis had always been intent to test the limits or biases of knowledge. When developing his staples thesis, for example, Easterbrook explained, Innis was testing the limitations of the economics mainstream—and he quoted Innis to that effect (Easterbrook, 1953b).

That being said, I must point out that Innis had much more in mind than just testing for bias in developing his staples thesis. Actually, his main mission was the development of a new economics for emerging economies, such as Canada’s, to counteract the exploitative thrust, as he saw it, of the economics mainstream (Innis, 1972b; 1979a). Throughout his life Innis was always dialectical with regard to the mainstream.

To continue, Innis later redeploed in his media/communication work tools he had originally developed to analyze staples (Easterbrook, 1953b), in part (again according to Easterbrook) to test limitations or biases. And again, Innis himself can be quoted to support this claim (Innis, 1972a). However, once again, I must remark, Easterbrook failed to note that Innis had much bigger fish to fry than just testing for bias. His goals in developing media/communication, in fact, were in important respects antithetical to his goals for his staples work. As developed below, Innis sought after universal understanding to strengthen possibilities for world peace.

Paper to media/communication
Other commentators suggest that in transitioning to media/communication, Innis merely extended his staples investigations of the timber and paper staples to news, public opinion, propaganda, advertising, and so forth (Berger, 1976; Bickerton, Brooks, & Gagnon, 2006; Heyer, 2003; McLuhan, 1971). The incompleteness (one might say the bias) in this claim, again, is that it fails to recognize that Innis’ communication work is in important aspects antithetical to the staples thesis and that he developed the two bodies of writing for diametrically opposed reasons. As developed below, Innis resolved this dialectical tension only on his deathbed.

Donald Creighton (1980), it is true, captured some of the mental anguish Innis must have experienced in transitioning from staples to media. However, Creighton also remarked (consistently with others just cited) that “originally, pulp and paper had no
doubt been conceived as [simply] another study of a Canadian staple industry” (p. 157). Creighton attributed Innis’ angst, then, not to inconsistencies between his staples and communication writings but to the fact that, “as time was to show fairly quickly, [pulp and paper] was, in fact, radically different” (p. 157). Creighton explained that unlike fish and fur, “communications was an almost illimitable field. Communications was an open-ended subject. It stretched back into remote historical times and forward into the present and future. It was an enormous, monstrous subject” (p. 157).

Creighton’s position would be more tenable, I would argue, were it not for the fact that Innis published what retrospectively may be regarded as his pivotal piece (Innis, 1979c) in 1934—six years prior to what Creighton claimed was the time Innis made an abrupt shift to media and communication as an extension of pulp and paper, and four years before publication of his essay on the lumber trade (Innis, 1979e). Nor did Innis (1979c), even in that pivotal 1934 essay, treat pulp and paper as just another staple. Rather, he tied the production of staples and various modes of transportation to inadequacies in the press, advertising, and to “the decline of freedom of speech and editorials, and the emergence of headlines and the modern newspaper” (p. 123); Innis remarked also on social scientists’ lack of understanding, which he related to the “technological drift of modern industrialism” (p. 127)—all themes developed in greater detail in his four media/communication books. Even more to the point, Innis claimed in 1934 that “the coincidence with the advent of radio of dictatorship in Russia, Germany, Italy, the United States, or Canada is not accidental” (p 129). The article is remarkable, too, for foreshadowing his later treatment of the price system as a space-binding, present-mindedly-biased medium of communication.

Economic historian to philosopher of history
According to Manahem Blondheim, Innis always had a deep interest in the transformative power of communication. Innis’ History of the Canadian Pacific Railway (1923), for instance, in Blondheim’s (2004) words, was “essentially a study of a medium of communication in a particular time and place” (p. 132). Likewise, the second volume of Select Documents in Canadian Economic History, co-edited with Arthur Lower (Innis & Lower, 1933), contained major sections on “Transportation and Communication.” Furthermore, Innis’ staples studies emphasized Europe’s influence on North America’s development. Blondheim (2004) concedes that Innis did undergo a transformation from economic historian to philosopher of history, but qualifies the magnitude of that transformation by emphasizing that “an interest in communication was a stable core in [Innis’] intellectual career” (p. 133).

In the present author’s view, Blondheim was astute to note that the transformative power of communication was an ongoing theme in Innis’ work. To stop there, though, is to obscure or downplay what was really a wrenching decision on Innis’ part; the notion of a transformation from economic historian to philosopher of history, complete with an abiding interest in communication, hardly captures the dissonance Innis’ transition entailed.

Economics vs. communication
James Carey was one of the few to have proposed a contradiction in Innis’ mind between economics and communication: there is an “incommensurable relation be-
tween economics and communication,” Carey (1994) wrote, adding: “That is the heart of the legacy left us by Harold Innis” (p. 325). According to Carey, communication means making common (or sharing), whereas economics is all about privatization. Stated alternatively, communication concerns community and culture, whereas economics is premised on hedonism, utilitarianism, and possessive individualism.

These are insightful observations when applied to mainstream economics and non-mainstream communication study. However, regarding Innis’ transition or transformation, Carey’s observations are of limited relevance. First, Innis’ economics was never the economics mainstream; Innis, the economist, never celebrated the efficacy of the price system or possessive individualism, which helps explain his attraction toward Veblen; Innis’ concern, rather, was always with the cultural/institutional underpinning of the price system and the price system’s recursive impact on culture and institutions. His book, The Fur Trade (1976), for instance, was all about how economic activity “makes common” and creates/imposes a culture. Second, as Carey well knew (and insistently complained about), the mainstream of U.S. communication study was never about culture and communication, either; rather, it addressed “transmissions” whereby messages from a sender to a receiver or receivers have “effects.” Carey was drawn to Innis precisely because Innis did not comply with that mainstream. In both his staples and media theses, then (and this was essentially Blondheim’s point), Innis investigated the “making common.” Therefore, we find here little explanation for Innis’ shift or transition from staples to media and communication.

A new theory of value
Robin Neill’s explanation is insightful and heuristic. As seen above, Innis characterized mainstream economics as inadequate to provide guidance to newer countries; therefore, he recommended that instead of focusing on relative prices, social scientists should “attempt [to] study ... factors underlying the market” (Innis, 1935, p. 284). Neill (1972) proposed, therefore, that Innis moved to media/communication primarily to “explore the effects of communication media as the technological determinants of the values [prices] relevant to the growth process” (p. 82).

Although Neill’s proposition is compelling, it also is only a (small) part of the story: Innis had much more urgent tasks in mind in his last decade than simply delving into the determinants of relative prices. Neill’s explanation, moreover, omits to even mention the fundamental contradictions between the staples and the medium theses.

Confronting bias
A.J. Watson’s account of Innis’ move from staples to media/communication differs yet again, albeit while supposing yet again a smooth transition. Watson proposed that Innis confronted the problem of bias in a deeper way after reading E.J. Urwick’s (1935) claim that objectivity is impossible in the social sciences. Innis (1935) responded immediately. Watson suggested that by emphasizing the notion of bias in his later media studies, Innis was struggling with “the conundrum posed by Urwick” (Watson, 2006, p. 167). (In his introduction to Empire and Communications, Innis actually remarked that “in a sense these lectures become an extension of the work of Graham Wallas and of E.J. Urwick” [Innis, 1972a, p. 9].)
On the other hand, Innis also stated at about the same time (1971d) that with his communication work he was, in a sense, responding to an exam question (“Why do we attend to the things we attend to?” [p. xvii]) set decades earlier by his professor at McMaster, James Ten Broeke. That question, too, concerned bias as Innis used the term.

Even more to the point, Innis’ exposure as a student to Frank Knight at Chicago meant that from the very beginning Innis had to struggle with bias: “Reality is not what is logical, but what it suits our purposes to treat as real,” Knight claimed. “Reality is the sum of the factors which condition purposive activity, including purposive thought” (1925, p. 396, emphasis added). Later, Innis espied bias even in his own PhD dissertation! In fact, Innis’ staples thesis was founded on three propositions concerning bias: first, that economic models developed in advanced countries are biased against improving conditions in developing ones; second, that countries and regions are biased in their development on account of trade relations with imperial powers; third, that particular staples bias development in particular ways.

Bias and distortions in understanding, then, did not suddenly trouble Innis in 1935 upon reading Urwick. Arguably, though, Urwick’s article, in combination with world events (discussed below, momentarily), plus possibly struggles with the manuscript for his book titled The Cod Fisheries (which forced him to modify lines of thinking successfully used in The Fur Trade), caused the notion of bias to trouble Innis more deeply and in different ways than hitherto, inducing him to approach the question in a new manner and for different reasons. Innis’ mental breakdown of 1937 was possibly a crisis point, from which he emerged with a new ontology, a revised epistemology, and a new set of pressing issues with which to grapple.

**Medium theory, the Great Depression, and the century of war**

In prefaces or introductions to three of his four books on media and communication, Innis declared clearly his urgent, practical goals—as opposed to, say, musing over Ten Broeke’s exam question, or formulating responses to Urwick, or extending staples theory from pulp and paper to newspapers, or fathoming the framework of the price system, or even fostering Canadian independence. In the preface to *Political Economy in the Modern State* (1946d), Innis proposed that “the first essential task is to see and to break through the chains of modern civilization which have been created by modern science” (p. vii)—a concision, incidentally, deserving extended meditation. In his essay bearing the same title, moreover, he declared that his intent was to “to indicate the circumstances which have been favourable to the growth of freedom and the spread of learning” (1946b, p. 139). In the preface he also stated that his book was intended for use by returning soldiers: “War veterans have been trained to do difficult things, and it is hoped that their training, enthusiasm and self confidence may be conserved and directed to the tasks of peace more difficult and more complex than those of war. The volume is intended as a guide and as a warning” (1946d, p. vii).

In his preface to *Changing Concepts of Time* (2004), similarly, Innis announced that “an attempt is made in this volume to elaborate the thesis developed in *The Bias of Communication* (Innis, 1971d) and in *Empire and Communications* (Innis, 1972a) in relation to immediate problems ... The problems of understanding others have become
exceedingly complex partly as a result of improved communications” (p. xxv, emphasis added).

In his preface to *Empire and Communications*, Innis similarly declared that, like some other notable authors whom he named, he would be suggesting “the significance of communication to modern civilization” (1972a, p. xiii). Then he opened his longer introduction with these words:

The twentieth century has been notable in the concern with studies ... designed ... to throw light on the causes of the rise and decline of civilizations, which have reflected an intense interest in the possible future of our own civilization ... The significance of a basic medium to its civilization is difficult to appraise since the means of appraisal are influenced by the media ... A change in the type of medium implies a change in the type of appraisal. (1972a, p. 9)

Noteworthy, too, for the present discussion, are remarks extracted from “Minerva’s Owl,” the inaugural essay of his other media/communication book, *The Bias of Communication*:

The varied rate of development of communication facilities has accentuated difficulties of understanding. Improvements in communication ... make for increased difficulties of understanding. (1971b, p. 28)

Running through these declarations from his four books on media and communication is the notion of increased misunderstanding (even to the point of war) as a concomitant of technological change—particularly changes in the predominant means of communication. Innis’ overarching purpose in inaugurating media/communication research, then, was to shed light on the contemporary world and its problems. The primary problem, he believed, was misunderstanding. Being an economic historian, his methods of approaching the topic were, of course, historical—at least, in part.

In identifying misunderstanding within contemporary Western civilization as the new focus for his research, Innis made two assumptions. One was that limitations to understanding (i.e., misunderstanding) are spread, amplified, and in fact provoked by communication media. Second, to attain insight regarding contemporary limitations on understanding, a promising strategy would be to investigate understandings within previous civilizations as they, by definition, were bereft of contemporary media. Innis stated: “[We can] perhaps hope that consideration of the implications of other media to other civilizations may enable us to see more clearly the bias of our own” (1971c, p. 34).

When Innis began switching from staples to media and communication in 1934, the world had endured the First World War and was in the grip of the Great Depression. Those cataclysmic events and circumstances proved to Innis both the extent and the gross importance of contemporary misunderstandings. Moreover, the world was about to enter, and was then perhaps already preparing to enter, World War II. By the time the Second World War was over, the U.S. had become a giant, militarized power; it had dropped atomic bombs on Japan and was engaged in an escalating arms race as but one component of a new “cold” war. In his final year of life, Innis was one of the first academics—likely *the* first distinguished academic in North America—to oppose the
Korean War, which he viewed as merely an exercise in U.S. imperialist aggression (Creighton, 1981; Heyer, 2003).

Certainly, the world lacked understanding! And, as Donald Creighton (1981) remarked, in his media/communication works “it was as though [Innis] was driven by a desperate compulsion to deliver his last message to a sick and troubled world” (p. 159). Forsaking the staples studies that had made him famous, Innis again threw discretion to the wind, this time to investigate developments in media and communication as contributors to heightened misunderstanding—a project by its very premise guaranteeing to estrange him from the political-economic elite.

No wonder the later Innis was so ignored, misinterpreted, and rejected. He placed his finger on the pulse of modernity and found modernity to be frail. In declaring that improvements in communication lead to greater difficulties in understanding, he was repudiating mainstay tenets of governments, media organizations, scholars, and indeed virtually all proponents of the contemporary, modernist mindset—namely, an axiomatic equating of technological change with human betterment!

Modernity is frail, Innis argued, partly on account of the very factors that purportedly make it so “great,” namely technological achievement and advanced communication. Innis declared that the “collapse of Western civilization [began] with the present [twentieth] century” (1946c, p. 94). “States are destroyed by ignorance of the most important things in human life”; they are destroyed by “a profound lack of culture,” which (following Plato) Innis defined as “the inability to secure a proper agreement between desire and intellect” (1946d, p. x): in Innis’ view, contemporary media of communication had the disastrous effect both of increasing desire and reducing intelligence.

**Innis’ new ontology: Permanence beyond time**

There are two ways (at least) of specifying Innis’ new and final agenda. One (as noted previously) is to portray his objective as illuminating limitations (or “biases”) of contemporary understanding through comparisons with previous civilizations. The second formulation, equally accurate, is remarkably different. It is to suggest that, in keeping with Innis’ avowed affinity to the Greeks and the oral tradition,2 and likely on account of lingering traces of his early religiosity, he sought to discern eternal, universal truths. His method for uncovering these was to scour previous civilizations to detect commonalities, consistencies, and recurrent patterns, to enable him to infer truths for his/our own times and thereby forge a common ground among cultures, among countries, and among all people.

Innis made this second formulation of his media project crystal clear in the closing pages of his crucial essay “A Plea for Time.” There he proposed that developments in modern communication have resulted in a “glorification of the life of the moment, with no reference beyond itself and no absolute or universal value” (Innis, 1971d, p. 89). He continued, now quoting from Wyndham Lewis’ *Time and Western Man* (1927): “The modern ‘clerks’ consider everything only as it exists in time, that is as it constitutes a succession of particular states, a “becoming,” a “history,” and never as it presents a state of permanence beyond time under this succession of distinct cases.’” Innis continued that “the form of mind from Plato to Kant [had] hallowed existence beyond change.” He concluded the essay with an admonition: “We must somehow escape on
the one hand from our obsession with the moment and on the other from our obsession with history” (pp. 89–90), history being, of course, according to the then-contemporary practice, an account of change. For Innis, detecting a constant beyond time was key to escaping both “obsessions.”

In his preface to Political Economy in the Modern State, incidentally, Innis made similar pronouncements, although there he referred to the “constant beyond time” as “natural law” and as “natural order” (1946e, pp. xiii, xiv, xvi; emphasis added). Natural law for Innis, to put it briefly, is the opposite of the present-mindedness he critiqued so vigorously throughout his media/communication work. It is, I believe, the key reason why Innis investigated past civilizations; he hoped to uncover common truths that apply or should apply today.

Innis’ “natural law,” I should note, is in no sense a “determinism.” Rather, it is shorthand for his quest to detect counterbalancing truths and universal values. In Empire and Communications, for example, he wrote: “Stoic philosophy [in the context of Rome] brought the ideas of world state, natural justice, and universal citizenship in an ethical sense, which were independent and superior to the enactment of kings” (Innis, 1972a, p. 119; emphasis added).

These two formulations of Innis’ last project, both supported by his own words and analyses, are in important respects antithetical. The first formulation proposes attaining insight through comparison, looking for differences; the second, in contrast, entails a quest for similarity, which is to say an absolute, a universal—a “constant beyond time.”

At the time of his death, the absolutist/universalist position he had supported so stridently in the final pages of “A Plea for Time” had so completely won over Innis that he even insisted: “I must begin by pleading for a general emphasis on a universal approach and by insisting as an economist that economic history is primarily concerned with the task of extending the universal applicability of economic theory and of strengthening a central core of interest” (1953, p. 17). Innis prefaced that astounding declaration by once again unleashing his dry wit: “I am in the position of the man who was about to be hung; when asked whether he had anything to say, he replied ‘This will certainly teach me a lesson’” (p. 17). Perhaps, through that dark anecdote, Innis was indicating that his support for a universalist economics was akin to a deathbed conversion, or a “lesson” he had learned at the conclusion of a lifetime of scholarship.

**In summary**

To return, then, to the question raised at the beginning of this article: Why would Innis choose, in the mid-1930s, again to become lonely and intellectually isolated, again to inaugurate and develop a line of research that few understood or appreciated, again to risk ostracism by disputing axioms held sacrosanct by Canadian and international elites? Noam Chomsky has provided (inadvertently, of course) what is likely the most general yet penetrating answer: Chomsky remarked that intellectuals traditionally have been “caught between the conflicting demands of truth and power.” Whereas intellectuals serving power can expect “prestige and affluence,” Chomsky remarked,
the intellectual choosing to meet the demands of truth “can expect to be a lonely creature, disregarded or reviled” (2014, pp. 22–23).

Innis’ intent, I have argued here, always was to serve the demands of truth. Fortuitously, his staples thesis received the approval of elites in Canada—for a time—likely because it accorded with their designs at the time to increase their domestic power vis-à-vis the USA. However, in his final decade, evidently, the demands of truth had become so precipitously inconsistent with the demands of power that it was impossible any longer for Innis to serve “two masters.”

Notes
1. This article is a revised chapter of Robert E. Babe, Wilbur Schramm and Noam Chomsky Meet Harold Innis: Media, Power, Democracy.

2. Innis wrote: “A new country, especially Canada, cannot afford to rely on the theory borrowed from old industrialized countries but she must attack with all the skill and industry she can command the task of working out a theory adapted to the situation in which she is able to defend herself against exploitation, against the drawing off of her resources and against the violent fluctuations which are characteristic of exploitation without afterthought” (Innis, 1972b, p. 149; see also Innis, 1979a, pp. 3–13).

3. Citing Tom Easterbrook, Carl Berger (1976) maintains that Innis made an abrupt shift to media/communication in July 1940, “a month after the military collapse of France” (p. 187). Creighton (1980), too, proposed that Innis’ transition to media/communication occurred in the summer of 1940. See also W.T. Easterbrook (1958b). For reasons discussed below, I think this is much too late and much too abrupt. Innis had begun considering pulp and paper as more than mere staples at least by 1934.

4. Watson reports that “in terms of print runs and sales, Innis’s communications works were not even modest successes … Only one thousand copies of The Bias of Communication were printed, of which 180 remained in stock in September 1959.” Moreover, “Clarendon Press declined to reissue Empire and Communications, as its original sales had been so meager” (Watson, 2006, p. 252). At this writing, Political Economy in the Modern State still awaits its first reprint!

5. For example, the contention that technological development is synonymous with human betterment. Innis, au contraire, insisted that advances in media are likely to lead to a new dark age (Innis, 1946b, p. 138).

6. Mary Innis Cates provided a different view: “So few biographers realize that my father was basically a happy man—he had a wonderful sense of humour and enjoyed all his travels and research. As a child, I remember his saying that while he was in the trenches in World War I, he vowed that if he got out alive he would never complain about anything again.” Personal correspondence from Mary Innis Cates, October 17, 2014. Innis’ buoyancy at home was affirmed in a telephone interview with Harold Innis’ younger daughter, Anne Innis Dagg, October 24, 2014.

7. Havelock (1982) wrote: “[Innis] was not always and consistently the completely dedicated scholar… For one thing, he was ambitious. The exercise of power and influence was something he valued, and sought, and achieved … He readily accepted appointments to public bodies and commissions which could give him contacts with the powers that be” (p. 24).

8. To cite but one of myriad possible examples: “[Academics have] been quick to work in collusion with [government bureaucracies], to pretend an omniscience equal to all occasions, and to become the kept class of autocracies” (Innis, 1946a, p. 31).

9. In 1933 Innis wrote his editor, James Shotwell, that The Cod Fisheries would be completed within a year; the book was not published, however, until 1940. Between 1933 and 1935, Innis received a good deal of editorial assistance on the manuscript, “trying to wrestle the unwieldy mass into publishable form,” according to Watson. Following his breakdown of 1937, it would seem, Innis largely delegated the editing of The Cod Fisheries to Shotwell and others. As early as 1935, moreover, Innis was planning
the book that eventually became Political Economy in the Modern State (1946a). Included in that book are two of his earliest transitional essays: “Unused Capacity as a Factor in Canadian Economic History” (1936; cited as 1946e) and “The Penetrative Powers of the Price System” (1938; cited as 1946f), both originally published shortly after his rejoinder to Urwick. Innis’s pivotal essay “The Canadian Economy and the Depression,” however, was published a year before Urwick’s piece appeared (see Innis, 1979c). In “Penetrative Powers,” incidentally, Innis tied staples to money and described money as a space-binding/time-shattering medium of communication efficacing tradition and wiping out weaker cultures.

10. Innis did continue to publish on staples after his breakdown until 1941: articles on dairy (1937), lumber (1938), wheat (1939), and mining (1941), the latter marking his final publication on staples (see, respectively, 1979d–g).

11. It is doubtful, though, that many war veterans jumped at Innis’ invitation. As noted by B.S. Kierstead in reviewing the book: “Most of the essays are [not] easy to read … The essays are a guide, rather, for the exceptional student, anxious to pursue the sometimes obscure progress of a brilliant and original mind in the difficult task of breaking new ground” (Kierstead, 1947, p. 600).

12. “My bias is with the oral tradition, particularly as reflected in Greek civilization, and with the necessity of recapturing something of its spirit” (Innis, 1972a, p. 190). There Innis wrote that “the condition of natural law has been interfered with, if not destroyed, by communications industries, the commercialization of language, national boundaries, demands for capital, and written constitutions— all of which have been disruptive to cooperation.” Many thanks to my colleague Edward Comor for drawing my attention to this quote.

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