Editorial

Vicissitudes of the Cyber

Literary cyberspace was always a dark, dystopian place. Now, in the light of the widening spotlight of actual empirical research, it turns out that cyberspace is pretty ugly indeed. The cyber is a space where mobs run riot, trolls lurk, and bullies rule; it is the schoolyard of our childhood nightmares revived. Or so argue some of the key pieces in this issue of the CJC.

Sociologist Michael Arntfield in “Towards a Cybervictimology: Cyberbullying, Routine Activities Theory, and the Anti-Sociality of Social Media” works through the classic literature on deviance, to shift the locus onto cyberbullying but less from the perspective of the offenders than that of cybervictims’ online behaviour. Viewing cybervictimology as an alloy of victimology, criminology, and the digital humanities, Arntfield proposes that the architecture of a given media platform itself acts as an aggravating factor. From this perspective, social media operate in an inherently risk-tolerant environment, customized for predation.

Artur de Matos Alves, in “Between the ‘Battlefield’ Metaphor and Promises of Generativity: Contrasting Discourses on Cyberconflict,” tracks the recent narrowing of cyberspace’s ecology as due to the “battlefield metaphor” that reframed cyberspace as of the early 1990s around a drive toward securitization and militarization. Drawing on social theorists such as Deleuze and Foucault, Matos Alves shows a change in thinking about cyberconflict in the early 2000s toward networked logics of global economic and political power that exposed major players to highly visible cyber damage. In turn, thinking further shifted to a revitalized conception of a global civil society, based on notions of “noopolitik” and the global “noosphere.” The return to the possibility of generative agency through networked politics, the exchange of ideas, and an engaged civility reveals deep incompatibilities with the dominance of a military rhetorical field.

For her part, Andrea Hunter in “The Digital Humanities and Democracy” argues that what characterizes the digital humanities is less a technological turn than a shared spirit of collaboration, access, and participation with deep roots in democratic thought. Hunter backs her argument with two case studies, one being the Orlando online digital archive of women’s writing in English, a collaboration between the University of Alberta and the University of Guelph. The other case study is the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University, Virginia, and in particular its Omeka digital platform that makes it easier to create online historical sites. Both case studies are attempts to open up access to the historical record and to involve people and voices from outside the academy.

Gemma Richardson’s “A History of Suicide Reporting in Canadian Newspapers, 1844–1990” provides a striking contrast between the current ban on reporting suicides, except for those of celebrities, and the extensive, detailed coverage that prevailed in
Canadian newspapers, here the Globe and Mail and the Toronto Star, until well into the mid-twentieth century. The mid-nineteenth-century Toronto papers gleefully combed through smaller Canadian papers as well as American ones to report on suicides in often excruciating detail. As Richardson shows, over time reporting on suicides moved from the realm of criminality to the medical, as suicides increasingly became seen as a psychiatric matter and then vanished from the news pages into the world of medicalization.

Robert E. Babe’s Research in Brief is an excerpt from his most recent book, Wilbur Schramm and Noam Chomsky Meet Harold Innis: Media, Power and Democracy (Lexington, 2015). In the chapter presented here, “Innis’ Great Transformation: Staples Thesis/Media Theory,” the author argues that Innis’ theoretical transformation from the staples thesis to the media theory of the later works was a change from one ontology to another, with a different epistemology and a new set of problems. Reviewing the writings of commentators on Innis, such as James W. Carey, A. J. Watson, and others, Babe argues that Innis’ transformation to media theory involved a dramatic break as well as a reversal of his earlier work on economic staples.

Adam Lauder’s “Celebration of the Body': Marshall McLuhan and the Sensory Conceptualism of N.E. Thing Co. Ltd.” takes the 1976 artist’s book, Celebration of the Body, by the Toronto conceptualists NETCO, and argues that under the influence of McLuhan’s ideas the group came up with a new artistic practice, one Lauder terms “sensory conceptualism,” that broke with the formalism of Conceptual art, the influential criticism of Clement Greenberg, and the commodity status of the artwork. For Lauder, this theoretical approach means taking seriously the status of communication theory for contemporary artists working in English Canada in the 1960s and in particular the co-evolution of bodies and technologies within a growing literature devoted to cultural representations of the body as information. Though grounded in the sensorial metaphysics of Thomism, McLuhan’s writings on the body depart from the theology of the medieval schoolmen to claim the media of communication as a prosthetic “sensorium,” of artificial exteriorization of being.

Sylvia Reitmanova, Diana L. Gustafson, and Rukhsana Ahmed’s “‘Immigrants Can Be Deadly’ Critical Discourse Analysis of Racialization of Immigrant Health in the Canadian Press and Public Health Policies” turns to different configurations of bodies, here the racialization of physical characteristics and differences in health status and behaviours that have been staples of the discourse about non-white immigrants since the late nineteenth century. The health and moral threats posed by immigrants made it easier to impose public health control policies. Many of the same discourses continue today, whether Chinese immigrants and the 2003 SARS outbreak or, more recently, Ebola. The present study examines newspaper coverage of immigrant TB in Canada between January 1999 and December 2008. The study found that the Canadian press continues to reproduce long-standing ideological discourses about immigrants from non-Western countries that remain prevalent in the Western press. According to the authors, focusing on personal health habits underemphasizes the role of social determinants such as poor-quality housing, malnourishment, and discrimination. Secondly, the study showed that racial discrimination of immigrants persists across all dimensions of Canadian society.

Ross Eaman’s “‘The Story Is Only the Platter on Which the Personality Is Served’: The Debate Over Media Integrity in CBC Radio’s Literary Arts Programming, 1948–1985” raises the problem of media integrity, or what happens to one medium in its migration to another? Using the case of CBC Radio’s literary arts programming and the celebratory narrative of Robert Weaver’s role in promoting Canadian literature and poetry on radio, Eaman argues that Weaver’s philosophy of radio entailed choices criticized by both production staff and management. Through various other factors (including audience numbers), the form of arts programming that prevailed ultimately favoured the ontology of radio.

Jacqueline Botterill, Marian Bredin, and Tim Dun’s Research in Brief, “Millennials’ Media Use: It Is a Matter of Time” tracked the media use of 388 Canadian university students, across a range of devices and platforms. The study found that while media are used as entertainment, this is giving way to socializing in neither trivial nor alienated ways. “Assembling sociality” is becoming the more challenging task in the face of new demands to socialize around the clock. Thus, media allow students to coordinate, shift, or stack their social interaction according to personal timetables.

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This issue marks a milestone in the life of the CJC. For the first time in well over 20 years, Rowland Lorimer is no longer a member of the CJC Board of Directors. Whether as editor of the journal, as its long-time treasurer, or as a font of wisdom in publishing matters, Rowly has been closely involved with the CJC since the early 1990s. It was his leadership that pushed the CJC into online publishing and subsequently into open source formats. It is largely because of Rowly’s dedication that the structure of the journal is what it is today.

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