THE METAPHOR OF DEPENDENCY AND CANADIAN COMMUNICATIONS:
THE LEGACY OF HAROLD INNIS

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An analysis of the influence of the writings of Harold Innis on the formation of ideas of Canada's dependency and the importance of communication in human history.

Une analyse de l'influence des écrits de Harold Innis sur la développement au Canada des idées de la dépendance et de l'importance des communications dans l'histoire humaine.

It is with some sense of lese-majeste and presumption that I a citizen of one of the old dominant metropoles, offer this critical engagement with Innis and his legacy to thinking about communications in Canada. I hope that my perspective as an outsider may be judged, in this instance, enabling rather than disabling. In constructing my own set of theoretical earthworks from behind which I can begin my sapping of the Innis redoubt I want to profit form the work of other outsiders to the Anglophone Canadian tradition. Gaetan Tremblay's skirmish with Innis in his review of the Melody, Salter, Heyer collection of 1981, Culture Communication and Dependency. The tradition of H. A. Innis in which he states of the collection: "L'ouvement, est trop exclusivement Canadien."

And Carolyn Marvin's critique "Space Time and Captive Communications History," (Mander, 1983) which though coming from the new dominant metropole, the United States, and therefore a somewhat uncertain defensive asset in Canada does, I believe, offer a compelling critique of what she calls Innis's Grand Theory of media history. Though her contribution is too readily outflanked by strategems such as Susan Crean's in her and Marcel Rioux's Two Nations:

The United States and Canada have become each other's best and biggest trading partners, but the trade has never been equal, following the classic imperial pattern whereby the colony functions as a resource hinterland for the metropolis by exporting cheap raw materials and importing them again as expensive finished goods. Not much has changed since the
days of the fur trade, and Harold Innis's famous staples theory, published in the Thirties, describes the present as aptly as it did the past.

It was Innis's argument that the staple-producing economy will never be transformed by industrialization but will remain a net exporter of resources and importer of manufactured goods, continuing to depend on borrowed capital and technology. He demonstrated in his exhaustive study of staple industries in Canadian history that the use made of resources, capital and labour has always been determined by absentee imperial powers -- first France, then Britain and now the United States. It wasn't long before Innis's unconventional ideas were pushed aside (though his reputation as an important and original scholar survived) in the headlong rush of Canadian academics to embrace the tenets of American scholarship (Crean and Rioux, 1984, 30).

Crean's view is, I suggest, paradigmatic of a strong current in English Canada's intellectual life and the remarks of Thomas W. Cooper (1982), reviewing in the Journal of Communication the volume of papers published after the 1978 Innis symposium at Simon Fraser University are similarly representative.

Among the least studied and most underrated thinkers of our century... Inns's achievement is as the first comprehensive historian of communication technologies and institutions and (as) a pioneer who both questioned and expanded the borders of social science. No less than any other author of 20th century his work constitutes a significant context for the study of communications (Cooper, 1982, 196).

The two major categories, through which the perception of Canada as disadvantaged in its communication relation to the United States is learned, come from Innis's work. They are the notions of dependency and that, as Innis says, "of empire as an indication of the efficiency of communication." These concepts are the transhistorical categories that Canadians use to understand the development of their country and its conditions of existence.

Dependency theory proposes that Canadian interests have systematically been subordinated to the interests of the dominant metropoles, whether the colonial powers exploiting a single product; fur, wheat, or timber at the expense of balanced development and national autonomy, or the United States tending in its trade with Canada to constitute Canada as a supplier of primary products (or attempting, e.g., in the fisheries and in disputes over Artic jurisdiction to appropriate resources Canadians deem to be theirs).

Dependency theory has passed through three main modalities -- first the "staples theory" that received its classical articulation in
Innis' finest work The Fur Trade In Canada (1930). The historical problem here of course is the development of manufacturing in Canada and Canada's transition to its current highly urbanized state. The second modality of dependency theory then argues that manufacturing in Canada is essentially of a "branch plant" kind with the metropolitan powers -- the United States pre-eminently -- retaining research and development and high value added stages of production at home.

There is a tertiary stage in which communications and culture are constituted as the principal loci through which dependency is exercised. This third stage analysis -- best exemplified by Dallas Smythe's Dependency Road (1981) -- integrates dependency theory with the abiding conception in Canada of the nation being synonymous with its communication systems. In the Seventeenth century the voyageurs exploration of the Great Lakes, Saskatchewan and Mackenzie water system in the course of the fur trade opened up an East-West communication system around which Canada was constituted. The Nineteenth century consolidated this East-West orientation with the construction of the Inter Continental and Pacific railways and this century the Canadian state sponsored other physical East-West links -- Trans Canada Airlines (later Air Canada), the Trans Canada Highway, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio and television networks, and Telesat Canada to knit the nation together electronically.

The classic text of the staple theory is Innis's The Fur Trade in Canada (1930; 1956). Its major thesis is that:

The trade in staples, which characterizes an economically weak country, to the highly industrialized areas of Europe and latterly the United States, and especially the fur trade, has been responsible for various peculiar tendencies in Canadian development (1956, 401).

Stated thus, there is nothing particularly exceptional about Innis's thesis though to sustain his judgement that these 'peculiar tendencies' had been negative and that other more favourable possibilities of development had been available for Canada would have required an economic history that considered other economic activities in Canada during the heyday of the fur trade and shown how fur trading 'under developed' them, and a more comprehensive account of the indigenous Canadian fur trading companies than is given. There is though no necessary reason to see staple trade as characterizing an economically weak country. Mackintosh (1967) in his somewhat misleadingly titled, Economic Factors in Canadian History, (which emphasizes geographical rather than economic factors) sees the staple as a necessary stage in economic development the early possession of which distinguished the more successful development of Britain's North American colonies (both in what were to become the United States and Canada) vis a vis those of France.
Innis's concentration on the Hudson's Bay Company makes a mercantilist analysis in which the surplus from the fur trade was predominantly remitted to the British metropole rather than retained for investment in Canada hard to resist. Nor does his chosen emphasis on the fur trade permit him to consider the industrial forts established by the Hudson's Bay Company and their impact on Canadian development—or dependency. There are then grounds for questioning the typicality of the fur trade and the paradigmatic status it, through Innis's study, has had for dependency theory. Smythe himself (1981, x) points out that the staple theory of Innis could have been applied to Britain's southerly thirteen colonies and does not explain either the rise to power of the United States or, the central question for Smythe, the articulation of Canada's dependency in manufacturing.

Rather than decisively demonstrating the fur staple's centrality in constituting Canada as a dependent economy, Innis shows how the economic characteristics of the beaver and the fur trade stimulated exploration and development in Canada. It is one of the strengths of his book that it offers data that can be reworked to support conclusions other than his (but see Eccles (1979) for a persuasive critique of "The Fur Trade" and Innis' scholarship). Innis cites abundant evidence of the advantages the fur trade brought to native Canadians—the Indians—quoting a contemporary Seventeenth Century French source reporting an Indian's remark:

> In truth my brother, the Beaver does everything to perfection. He makes for us kettles, axes, swords, knives, and gives us drink and food without the trouble of cultivating the ground (Innis, 1956, 28).

There is much evidence cited by Innis that the fur trade was as much a classic positive trading relationship in which each of the trading partners exchanged goods in which they enjoyed a comparative advantage in production. The Europeans supplying cooking pots, knives, axes, firearms, and woolen cloth enabling the Indians to control nature and appropriate a surplus from it far more effectively than they had in the past. The Indians employing their knowledge of the land, the habits of game, and culture that made for survival in the woods thus supplying the Europeans with furs. But for Innis the fur trade was decisively one in which Canada remained dependent:

The fur trade was vitally dependent on manufactured goods from Europe. The organization never took an independent position from the old world such as an organization with diversified economic growth could afford. Canada remained in the first instance subordinate to France and in the
second place subordinate to Great Britain, chiefly through the importance of the fur trade and its weak economic development (Innis, 1956, 118).

But, as Innis states in certain points, a more nuanced account is necessary. What alternative models of development were there for Canada? Its climate and terrain were far less advantageous for agricultural development and therefore for settlement than were, and are, those of the United States. Atlantic Canada has in Halifax one major ice-free port while the United States has a plurality of excellent ice-free harbours from Boston southwards. The advantages of climate, soil, and ease of communication explain far more satisfactorily than dependency theory, the more rapid and diversified development of the American economy than the Canadian.

The emphasis of dependency theorists is to assert cultural, social and political factors as the decisive ones in determining Canada's dependency. They pay little attention to those of geography and climate. It is possible to argue that only the exploitation of the fur trade offered possibilities of economic development in Canada and the lamentation of the imbalanced and dependent economy that stemmed from that is simply mischievous when it chooses to ignore the advantages of the longer growing season, ice-free ports, and fertile soils of the United States south of the Canadian border. These factors of climate and soil, of course, differentiate regions within Canada too and go far to explain the relative prosperity and diversity of the economy of southern Ontario vis-à-vis, say, Nova Scotia or Quebec.

Toward the end of The Fur Trade in Canada Innis begins to advance arguments that construct the inheritance of the fur trade positively:

In eastern Canada industrialism was following the path of the fur trade. Directors of the Grand Trunk planned the extension of the railway to the prairies and to the Pacific Coast. The centralized organization of the Hudson's Bay Company made possible the acquisition of control by other interests in 1863 as it had in 1811 by Lord Selkirk. (Innis, 1956, 337)

That is the Hudson's Bay Company became an instrument of, not a brake on, diversified economic development. In his conclusion to The Fur Trade In Canada (see especially pages 339 - 400), Innis sketches the positive impact of the wheat staple and the extractive industries in creating a burgeoning and diversified Canadian economy. In spite of his qualified return to optimism and Innis' citation of the mutual benefits of the trading relation between the fur merchants and hunter/trappers, the dominant motif of The Fur Trade in Canada is a demonstration that the analysis of classical political economy, e.g., that the spread of free market relationships necessarily led to an integrated world market in which division of labour on the basis of comparative advantage maximized benefits for all concerned, does not hold good for
Canada and that, overall, Canada has lost through following the line of development based on staples relative to that it might have enjoyed with a more balanced and diversified mode of development.

The central metaphor in the version of dependency theory that followed Innis's work on the staples is that of the "branch plant." Recent Canadian work, notably in the journal, Studies in Political Economy, has subjected this secondary stage of dependency theory to critical interrogation. This journal published a special issue on "Rethinking Canadian Political Economy" in 1981. The central theme of this issue, dependency theory, was subjected to substantial critical interrogation. The theoretical critique of dependency theory was axed around the propositions that dependency theory equates development with manufacturing (Schmidt, 1981, 76), that foreign ownership does not, as dependency theory asserts, lead necessarily to a loss of national control (Panitch, 1981, 25), and empirical demonstration that the lack of development of manufacturing in Canada in the Nineteenth century, relative both to the United States and Europe was because of the high wage proletariat in Canada commanding real wages higher, and in some cases substantially higher, than in European and North American competitive states (Panitch, 1981, 16). Indeed Panitch argues that the size of the Canadian domestic market for manufacturers was sufficiently large to attract American investment in "branch plants" to serve that market and also gain access to British Empire markets that would otherwise be protected by Imperial tariffs.

The subjective experience of immiseration and poverty eloquently and movingly articulated by a variety of writers (see inter alia Myers, 1914, 1972, for a Nineteenth Century account; Vallieres, 1971, for a Twentieth Century account) is no evidence of dependency. Panitch constructs a persuasive argument that the relation of Canada to the British metropole created an environment in which, in spite of the high wage proletariat, manufacturing in Canada was attractive to U. S. capital. This is a thesis that is hard to reconcile with a notion of dependency either on Britain or the United States. However, the signs of that successful policy of attracting inward investment are customarily taken by dependency theorists as evidence of dependency. Smythe (1981, 91) cites Canada's status as the country with the most direct United States investment (31% of all foreign U. S. direct investment in 1964, 22% in 1978 with the United Kingdom the next largest recipient of U.S. investment with 12%) and Canadian investment in the United States -- $6.2 million in 1978 -- as evidence of Canada's dependency.

What Smythe, Panitch, et al. share in their analysis is a view that the staple theory is useless as a means of understanding Canadian dependency: for the history of Canadian industrialization is one in which the surplus from the exploitation of the primary staples of lumber, fur, and especially wheat, was diverted under the National policy of the Nineteenth century MacDonald government to finance the development of manufacturing. Producers of the primary staples were compelled by the tariffs erected under the National Policy to pay
higher than world prices for manufactured goods. The tariff barrier protected Canadian manufacturers and encouraged inward investment of non-Canadian capital so that the growing Canadian (and British Empire) market for manufacturers could be exploited. The staple in fact offered a surplus whereby a diversified economy was established, 62% of Canada's G.D.P. is in the service sector (Dept. of Communications, 1983, 17). However, the signs of the successful move away from a staple based economy are now perceived by Smythe and others as indications of a new non-staple based dependency.

Contradictions in the second modality of Dependency Theory then lead to the development of a tertiary stage in which a new focus for dependency -- culture -- is identified:

It is not the state that primarily sustains American imperialism within Canadian society. The imperial relation is secured and maintained more fundamentally within civil society itself -- above all in our culture -- not so much the 'haute culture' of the intellectuals but the popular culture which is produced and reproduced in advertising, the mass media and the mass educational system. Canadian dependency remains by virtue of the penetration of civil society itself by American culture. (Panitch, 1981, 26 - 27)

Dallas Smythe's Dependency Road, Culture, Communications, Consciousness and Canada (1981) attempts a theorization of tertiary or culture dependency. The book begins:

This is a study of the process by which people organized in the capitalist system produced a country called Canada as a dependency of the United States. Rooted in the realistic history of how monopoly capitalism was created in the United States and Canada simultaneously it focuses on the role of communications institutions in producing the necessary consciousness and ideology to seem to legitimate that dependency. (Smythe, 1981, ix)

The specific kernel of Smythe's thesis is hard to characterize in terms other than those he uses, but he argues essentially that the mass media constitute Canadians as an "audience commodity." This commodity is sold by broadcasters, newspaper proprietors, film distributors and the like to advertisers who wish to influence the audience to "buy" either "consumer goods and services" and/or "political candidates and public policies." So far Smythe's argument is unexceptional and indeed a familiar motif of "critical theory." The originality of Smythe's argument inheres in his abolition of the distinctions between "base" and "super structure," and consequential argument that audiences work in their consumption of mass media messages. Indeed he affirms that the process of audience interaction with media messages is not consumption at all but a productive transformation, the surplus from which is appropriated by capital. Audience work is "learning to buy
goods and spend income accordingly" (Smythe, 1981, 39).

His argument enables him to constitute the media messages consumed by audiences not as a "free lunch," but as the equivalent, in the bargain struck between the working audiences and capital, to the payment for productive labour in the wage bargain. The gratifications enjoyed by audiences in their consumption of e.g., Magnum P.I., and their production of themselves as a commodity -- the audience -- sold to advertisers are, for Smythe, the wages.

He constitutes the activity of watching television as work in which an exploitative bargain is struck, in which, as in most capitalist wage bargains, the surplus generated is principally appropriated not by the labourer but by the (usually American) capitalist.

This analysis leads to some absurd conclusions; notably that it is audiences that are now the major opposition to capitalism and not the working class whether organized in political parties or trade unions:

In creating the mass-produced audience, monopoly capitalism produced not only its own chief protagonist (and agenda setter) but its major antagonist in the core area, displacing organized labour from that role (1981, xiii).

But it does enable Smythe to deal with a major problem for Canadian scholars who wish to argue that the relation between American media and Canadian audiences is an exploitative one in which (as in other economic spheres in which the relationship of "dependency" exists) yet again the nice guys lose.

The problem is that posed by the flow of American television signals across the Canadian border and their consumption by Canadians at zero cost. How can something valued by Canadians, widely consumed by them as a free lunch, be regarded as disadvantageous? To be sure Canadians pay, as do Americans, for the cost of television in their consumption of the commodities advertised on television, the retail price of which includes the cost of advertising. But Canadians pay none of the cost of regulation of U.S. television; often they pay none of the costs of advertising, for products advertised may not be sold in Canadian markets, e.g., the advertising of Reagan/Bush and Mondale/Ferraro, and they consume a product financed by advertising revenues (or as Smythe would put it the sale of the audience commodity) in a market ten times the size of the Canadian market. The product thus possesses production values beyond those the smaller Canadian market could finance. If the lunch is bigger than Canadians alone could finance, how then can this be a dependent or exploitative relationship? Harold Innis's essay, "Technology and Public Opinion in the United States," (1951) describes in its final sections the regime in the Nineteenth century United States printing industry in which a similar free lunch was enjoyed by American readers and printers at the expense of British authors and publishers. Because U.S. copyright law did not
recognize the intellectual property rights of works published outside of the United States, British novels and other publications were printed in the U.S.A. Consideration of this case under the dependency theory rhetoric tends to suggest that "dependency" on a foreign metropole for cultural goods is by no means incompatible with either robust national identity or the successful pursuit of interests that are not those of the metropole.

Richards and Pratt (1979) in their Prairie Capitalism offer a brilliant critique of the political conclusions drawn from the staple theory arguing that:

Any a priori presumption against staples is suspect. Within the traditions and norms of North American capitalism, the choice of a staple-led strategy of development may well be the most rational course (328).

They base their argument on analysis of the modalities of political-economic development in the western provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan and their successive staples of wheat, natural gas, oil, and potash. At numerous points in their demonstration, Richards and Pratt affirm the typicality of the western provincial experience for Canada as a whole pointing to the symmetry of the Nineteenth century National Policy of using the wheat staple surplus for the development of manufacturing in Canada and the Twentieth century provincial strategies of using the resource staple surpluses for either diversified secondary manufacturing or "forward linked" staple based manufacturing. Their use of the provincial economies as a microcosm of the Canadian economy leads them, in offering a critique of the dependency and underdevelopment arguments, to return to a classical theory of comparative advantage and pull the rug from under the foundations of Canadian nationalism and its conception of the role of the Canadian state.

We find no confirmation of the thesis that provinces heavily dependent on the exploitation and sale of staples are thereby placed in a permanent position of political dependency vis-a-vis external capital (Richards and Pratt, 1979, 8).

Like Panitch's (1981) essay in Studies In Political Economy, Prairie Capitalism represents a substantial re-thinking of the classic dependency theory articulated by the authors, Panitch and Pratt (Panitch, 1977). But whereas Panitch (1981) attempts to maintain a dependency model through rearticulating the theory in its tertiary, culturist, mode, Pratt -- with his new collaborator Richards -- abandons it altogether. Richards and Pratt argue that action at the political level cannot conjure into existence in Canada a diversified economy, that the conditions of Canadian "dependency" and "underdevelopment" have nothing to do with Canada's social and political order but are essentially geographical and climatic. Hence, "dependency" theory has led to a damaging misrecognition of Canadian interests and
an absence of appropriate political and economic strategies to realize those interests. There is, then, strong a priori grounds for subjecting this "dominant paradigm" in Canadian audio-visual media policy to critical scrutiny.

The second central category in Innis' work, that of:

Using the concept of empire as an indication of the efficiency of communication. It will reflect to an important extent the efficiency of particular media of communication and its possibilities in creating conditions favorable to creative thought (Innis, 1950, 11).

has become the central thesis of what is now known as the Toronto school, and the notion of the determining role of communication in the achievement and retention of power by societies is also a central proposition in the media imperialism thesis. In The Bias of Communication, (1951) Innis offered a series of readings of the development, rise and fall of different societies in terms of their technologies -- principally their communication technologies. A characteristic of Innis' later writings, and his work directly addressing the question of symbolic communication are of this period, is his gnomic and lapidary style. The kernel text of Innis' writings on communication -- Minerva's Owl -- is studded with assertions that:

Western civilization has been profoundly influenced by communication and that marked changes in communications have had important implications. (1951, 3)

Successful imperial organization came with the dominance of force represented by the Pharaoh in Egypt though the Egyptian Empire depended on cuneiform for its communications (page 6)

Alexandria broke the link between science and philosophy. The library was an imperial instrument to offset the influence of Egyptian priesthood (page 10).

The effect of the discovery of printing was evident in the savage religious wars of the 16th and 17th centuries. Application of power to communication industries hastened the consolidation of vernaculars, the rise of nationalism, revolution and new outbreaks of savagery in the 20th century (page 29).

Mechanized communication divided reason and emotion and emphasized the latter (page 30).

Innis' epigone, Marshall McLuhan, gingerly deals with this flannel by constituting Innis's as a modernist poetic discourse.
To anyone acquainted with poetry since Baudelaire and with painting since Cézanne, the later world of Harold A. Innis is quite intelligible. Without having studied modern art and poetry, he yet discovered how to arrange his insights in patterns that nearly resemble the art forms of our time. Innis presents his insights in a mosaic structure of seemingly unrelated and disproportioned aphorisms (McLuhan, 1977, vii).

The unifying element in these writings of Innis is an attempt to construct an unicausal technological determinist account of human history. Innis’s history is a materialist history in which technology determines both being and consciousness. In his account of cultural development in the West in Industrialism and Cultural Values (1950) Innis spells out a chain of connected observations spanning an enormous geographical and temporal range originating from a single cause. Though he covers his bases with the qualification “in part” no other forces are addressed in his argument.

The success of organized force was dependent in part on technological advance, notably in early civilizations, in the use of the horse, the crossing of the light African horse with the heavier asiatic horse, the introduction of horse riding and cavalry to replace horse driving and chariots and the use of iron as a substitute for bronze. The Hittites, with the use of iron, succeeded in building an empire with a capital which emphasized sculpture and architecture, but was checked on the south by Babylon and on the north and west by the Greeks with their control over the sea at Troy. They were followed by the Assyrians who exploited technological advance in warfare and made fresh contributions to its development. With a new capital at Nineveh, they succeeded in offsetting the prestige of the Nile and of Babylon and establishing an empire to include the civilizations of both. Prestige was secured, not only by architecture and sculpture, but also by writing (Innis, 1951, 134-135). [My emphasis].

Statements are subject to challenge by either criticism of the quality of their argument or by objection to their empirical content. But propositions of this degree of generality elude challenge through their very generality, their refusal to advance judgments specific enough to be tested and their characteristically descriptive syntax that implies rather than states analytical propositions. Thus Innis writes: “The Hittites with the use of iron succeeded in building an empire with a capital...”, with the key element of is argument “with the use of iron” introduced as an interesting fact about the Hittites rather than as a determinant of the course of their history as would a formulation like “through the use of iron.” Hence, the course of Innis’ arguments is hard to follow, or to test stage by stage. They slither through the text unarrested by the reader’s interrogation and
present themselves at the end for acceptance or rejection in toto. Indeed one of Innis' commentators has resorted to constituting Innis' prose as a kind of Kabbalistic discourse in order to keep it on the scholarly agenda. R. Whitaker (1983) argues that: "If he [Innis] was typically cryptic it was because he had a secret message, both to convey and conceal."

So comprehensive are Innis' range of references that any single reader will find it difficult to assess the quality of the evidence or the conclusions Innis draws from them. Empirical objections to more than fragments of his propositions would require a lifetime of study embracing an eclectic set of topics ranging from the life of the beaver to ancient civilizations. But so wide ranging are Innis's references that for most scholars he will set foot briefly on territory about which they know something. And when this happens, I find myself more often vigorously dissenting from Innis's judgements than ceding assent to his versions of fields about which I know little. There is, for example, in The Bias of Communication, a paragraph that runs:

In England the absolutism of the Tudors involved suppression of printing and encouragement of the Renaissance and of the Reformation. Abolition of the monasteries and the disappearance of clerical celibacy was followed by sweeping educational reforms. The printing press became "a battering ram to bring abbeys and castles crashing to the ground." Freedom from the Salic law made it possible for women to ascend the throne and encourage the literature of the court. Restrictions on printing facilitated an interest in the drama and the flowering of the oral tradition in the plays of Shakespeare (Innis, 1951, 54 - 55).

A number of the key arguments here are at best misleading and at worst false. Printing was not suppressed by the Tudors -- indeed by the end of the Sixteenth century it was impossible to police effectively and a variety of unauthorized tracts, e.g., those of "Martin Marprelate," were in circulation. It's hard to see how the "suppression of printing" could co-exist with the use (metaphorical I assume) of the printing press as a "battering ram to bring abbeys and castles crashing to the ground." Court literature was not dependent on female royal patronage but thrived under the monarchs (Henry VIII, Edward VI, James I) who preceded and followed the Tudor Queens. And it is highly misleading to regard Shakespeare's plays as either representative of the Tudor drama or as drawing only on an oral tradition.

Again in The Bias of Communication there are extraordinary statements about Nineteenth century Germany and the interrelationship of printing, radio, the Treaty of Versailles and European nationalism.

The Treaty of Versailles registered the divisive effects of the printing industry in its emphasis on self-determination. The monopoly of knowledge centering around the printing
press brought to an end the obsession with space and the neglect of problems of continuity and time. The newspaper with a monopoly over time was limited in its power over space because of its regional character. Its monopoly was characterized by instability and crisis. The radio introduced a new phase in the history of western civilization by emphasizing centralization and the necessity of a concern with continuity. The bias of communication in paper and the printing industry was destined to be offset by the bias of radio (Innis, 1951, 60).

First, of course, the Treaty was selective in its application of the principal of self-determinism, while the Austro-Hungarian empire was broken up on broadly national self-determining lines, with significant exceptions as with the German speaking populations of Italy and Czechoslovakia. The occupation of the Rhineland, the creation of the boundaries between Poland and Russia, and Germany and France and Belgium were not instances of self-determination. Nor, of course, was the parcelling out of the German and Turkish empires to the victorious allies done on the basis of self-determination. Secondly, Innis's remarks about newspapers and radio do not correspond to the differentiated European experience. Radio did not necessarily centralize (see the radio regime in the Netherlands and the continuation of the German network on a regional basis), nor are newspapers necessarily regional (vide the British press). Similar absurd and ignorant generalizations permeate other essays in the Bias of Communication collection. "A Plea For Time" repeats the Treaty of Versailles canard (page 80) and adds:

The rise of Hitler to power was facilitated by the use of the loudspeaker and radio. By the spoken language he could appeal to minority groups and minority nations. Germans in Czechoslovakia could be reached by radio as could Germans in Austria. Political boundaries related to the demands of the printing industry disappeared with the new instrument of communication (Innis, 1951, 81).

Hitler, of course, did not rise to power through the use of the "loud speaker and radio"--the Nazi's had no control over radio until after their "seizure of power." Their rise to power was based on substantial popular discontent with the Weimar Republic and a successful combination of terror applied to opponents and rewards to supporters. German printed works circulated readily outside the boundaries of Germany and central European national boundaries can never be described as "related to the demands of the printing industry." The first vernacular text printed in Europe, Der Ackerman Der Bohmen (The Bohemian Farmer), was printed in German in Prague. Nor have they changed so substantially from their range (certainly a very fluid range) between Gutenberg and Marconi so as to justify Innis's verb, "disappeared." Can the Oder Neisse Line, the Elbe and the Rhine really be regarded as boundaries related either to the demands of the printing industry or to radio? A Canadian, of all people, should know that
national boundaries do not correspond very often to linguistic or cultural boundaries or to the circulation areas of newspapers and broadcasts.

In Empire and Communications (1950) Innis gives a characteristically discursive account of successive "civilizations" or "empires": Egypt, Babylon, Greece, Rome and the ebb and flow of power within post-medieval Europe and its Empires. While the two hundred and more pages of Empire and Communications are full of interesting perceptions and ideas — his accounts of empires and their communications are neither systematic nor particularly well focussed. Rather then examining the particular impact of communications systems, technologies and practices on successive empires, Innis includes observations on their communication systems in a discursive account of their agriculture, organization of political rule, legal and familial systems and military organizations. The impact of communications as such is not sufficiently differentiated from the effect of other factors for Innis to argue, or do more than assert, that the structure and nature of communication has been any more decisive a force in the life of empires than any or all of a number of other factors. Thus his chapter on post Roman Europe titled, "Parchment and Paper," while describing the technologies of production and modes of use of paper and parchment also treats the interaction between Islam and Christianity, the dissemination of Arab thought throughout Europe and sketches a connection, not particularly original, between the rise of religious dissent, intellectual life and the book trade. In the final chapter, "Paper and the Printing Press," Innis is simply engaging in an accumulation of (interesting) facts, any or all of which might or might not be relevant, might or might not support his general propositions.

Empire and Communications then exemplifies Innis's characteristic mode of grand assertion of relationships and identifications of major causes yoked together with an enormous accumulation of facts some of which, shotgun fashion, hit the target and can be appropriated to support his argument, other are simply irrelevant to it. In Innis' work the crucial mediating stage of argument is missing. He does not link his magpie collection of fascinating facts with his major propositions, does not demonstrate to the reader the necessity of his conclusions when x, y, or z, items of evidence are considered. Consequently there is for the sympathetic reader some attractive and engaging conclusions and a mass of information some of which, if only because of the quantity and heterogeneity, can be grabbed to support the conclusions. For a skeptical reader, Innis offers only a set of take or leave it dogmas, the arbitrariness of which is camouflaged by a thick frosting of sparkling information -- facts lining the nest of an intellectual magpie and concealing the fundamental intellectual disorderliness of Innis' system. Innis's major propositions may or may not be true, but he offers no argument that will convince a skeptical reader that his ordering of events is to be preferred to alternatives.
There are then grounds for skepticism about the usefulness of Innis's central categories: those of dependency and the central determining role of communication as an agency of human history. Innis himself in The Fur Trade in Canada suggests how the exploitation of the beaver staple created an infrastructure for the development of manufacturing in Canada. Richards and Pratt suggest that the appropriation of the surplus from the staples in order to create the developed and diversified economy enjoined by dependency theorists in order to end Canada's dependency has been extremely wasteful, transferring resources from spheres of production in which Canada enjoys comparative advantage to those in which it does not. Seen through this optic dependency theory becomes an ideology of self-fulfilling prophecy and Canada's dependency a fiction conjured into existence only by the fetishization of national economic autarchy and a desire for secondary and tertiary productive sectors.

But a critique of the theory for its technical incompetence, its internal contradictions, selective appropriation of evidence and ability to both continuously assert that Canada is underdeveloped through dependency while adapting itself to the transformations of the Canadian economy from primary to secondary to tertiary production is not enough. We still have to explain the hold of dependency theory on the imagination of Canadian intellectuals. Here I believe the subjective factor of Innis's Canadianness is important. His theories offer an ideology that legitimize Central Canada's development of its diversified economic base-first in manufacturing and now increasingly in services of information and culture -- at the expense of the resource and renewable resource sectors. Probably more important, his theories give a key role in nation building to Canadian intellectuals -- which they have not been slow to seize. Canadians have been able to assume that the dependency phenomenon is an integrated transhistorical experience for them and their country, largely because Harold Innis integrated in his life's writings analysis of primary, secondary, and tertiary dependency. This contingent connection in the work of one author of analysis of the effects of the fur staple on Canada, of the effects of the construction of manufactured communication infrastructure (the Canadian Pacific Railway), and the production of a general theory of symbolic communications and their social power has led, improperly, to a perception of a continuity in Canadian dependency. The evident scholarship of Innis's early work, notably The Fur Trade in Canada has lent credence to the extraordinary farrago of assertion and inaccuracy that passes as theory in his last works, The Bias of Communications and Empire and Communication.

Inniss's communication theory, the credence of his work on the primary staples commands, and the consequential exclusive emphasis Canadian nationalists have placed on the agency of the state as the only defence against the dominant metropole has produced in the Canadian policy discourse a real blind spot. Not that identified by Smythe, but a blind spot that equates popular taste, the preferred consumption of American television by Canadians with a kind of national
serfdom and produces a remorseless hostility to both foreign influence and to the popular imagination.

Innis can better be understood, I think, as an ideologue for an important stratum in Anglo-Canadian society than as a general theorist of a world communication order. Innis’s work has been appropriated as a system of theoretical earthworks from which the largely Central Canadian elite that has captured the state cultural institutions and enormous subsidies from the public purse defends its prerogatives.

As Pratt suggests when discussing "underdevelopment" and "dependency" within Canada, a response of the periphery -- in the case, he argues, of The West -- to the privileged centre, Central Canada -- is to demand compensatory action in order to redress the disadvantages stemming from the notionally dependent condition. Action, he suggests, that reflects:

The desire of a peripheral political, cultural or ethnic group to possess and enjoy an industrial core of its own where wealth, attractive careers and power are located (Pratt, 1977, 158).

If for "industrial" we substitute "cultural", we may approach an understanding not only of why Innis retains his currency in elite discourse in English Canada but also why there is an enduring refusal to acknowledge the faults of public sector cultural institutions. Few Anglophones are prepared to grapple seriously with the proposition that if most Canadians most of the time watch American television, 70.24% audience share for American programming in Toronto, (Hothi, 1981) and that if the Public Broadcasting System in Northern areas of the United States can secure 50% of their public donation revenue from Canada (Remington, 1984, 14), then there must be something wrong with what Canadian television offers. It is not simply a question of the higher production values of U.S. vis-a-vis Canadian television though that is undoubtedly important. In the magazine sector for example, Macleans competes successfully against Time and Newsweek in spite of their comparative advantages. In book publishing Harlequin Romances thrive. Rather it is that there is a pervasive disdain in the Canadian public cultural sector for popular taste and a consequential oppressive earnestness in much of what is offered.

Sydney Newman on his return to Canada to take up the post of Film Commissioner of the National Film Board described Film Board films as "stinking of probity." Newman went to England in the 1950's in the wake of the success with British audiences of the thirty-five CBC TV dramas the B.B.C. purchased in order to claw back audiences that had overwhelmingly been lost to the new British commercial television. In working successively for the commercial sector and for the B.B.C., Newman virtually invented television drama in Britain. He was able to draw on the positive elements of competition for the audience's attention following the introduction of commercial television to initiate a
form of television drama that was popular, rooted in the concerns and experiences of its audiences, and which had a very high aesthetic value. It is essentially on Newman's ground work that contemporary popular entertainment, but entertainment that engages acutely with the central issues of life in Britain today, like Out (Thames), Harry's Game (Yorkshire), and Driving Ambition (B.B.C.) Edge of Darkness (B.B.C.) is constructed. When interviewed in Cinema Canada (1974, No. 15), Newman was given a very rough ride for his plebian insistence that "the cost of art in our kind of society has to be in relation to the number of people whose imaginations it will excite (1974, 46) as well as the suggestion that the lack of success of Canadian films with the Canadian public was not wholly explicable by the comparative advantage enjoyed by American competition but was also due to their lack of appeal to audiences.

It is indeed ironic that Mark Starowicz in his Calgary speech in 1984 "Slow Dissolve" invokes the British TV Drama created by a Canadian as the model to which Canadian should now aspire (interestingly this was deleted from the version printed in This Magazine).

These are I know not simply unfashionable but offensive ideas in Central Canada. Yet once one leaves Southern Ontario and the Anglophone milieu of Montreal, (I oversimplify of course for everyone knows Dallas Smythe is a Westerner) then a different perspective emerges from the regions within Canada that play the role of subordinate periphery to Central Canada's dominant metropole.

It is an enduring blind spot of academics to believe that ideas count. Seeking to explain Canadian television's loss of audience to U. S. competition in terms of some fallacies in Harold Innis's analysis of the economic characteristics of the beaver does have its absurd side. However, I believe that the loss of the popular imagination and mass audience by Anglophone broadcasters -- a more nuanced account is necessary in French Canada -- to U.S. television is not simply a question of American comparative economic advantage or of U. S. media imperialism. Rather I think the coupling in Innis's work of an economic theory of dependency with a view of the determining power of communications technology has offered Central Canadian cultural and political elites a rationale for the economic policies that favour the development and maintenance of secondary and tertiary productive sectors largely physically located in Ontario at the expense of the staple producers -- mainly the west -- and for the cultural policies that serve to maintain their embattled and declining hegemony. Innis's ideas offer this stratum a rationale for their desired role.
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