**BOOK REVIEWS**

*Empire and Communications*
Harold A. Innis
Edited by David Godfrey
Victoria, B.C.: Press Porcepic/Softwords, 1986

Dr. Sally Zerker of York University, a student of Harold Innis' in his first course in communications, in the late 1940s, has said that the course "was so wild it was almost breathtaking." Presenting Innis through the rhetorical prism of his own structuralism, Marshall McLuhan nonetheless introduced *Empire and Communications* accurately to the reader as seeking "patterns in the very ground of history and existence." The combination of the power of Innis' imagination suggested by Dr. Zerker and the grounded quality of his analysis referred to by McLuhan (which provides much-needed resistance to the tendency to idealism in communication thought) has been recognized as an essential feature of his contribution. Innis' statement in his own introduction to his book that he is using "the concept of empire as an index of the efficiency of communication" is a wonderfully dry understatement, by inversion, of what otherwise could weakly, and less suggestively, be expressed as "the study of the role of communication in large-scale social organization."

The "difficult" quality of Innis' writing has occasionally been remarked on, and Godfrey repeats the criticism which apparently stems from the fact that Innis ignores the rules of high-school essay writing. Innis' prose is dense, elliptical and elastic, and it is difficult to imagine how another style could accommodate the wealth of information and the torrent of ideas he strives to share with his reader. The development of a characteristic style has been crucial to creative communication thinkers as diverse as John Dewey and Michel Foucault, indeed, for important thinkers in any field, so that carping on Innis' style seems both sophomoric ("Why doesn't he write like Coles Notes?") and discriminatory.

Whether on study and reflection the author's argument is comprehensible and significant represents another sort of assessment. The wealth of commentary on Innis' communication work since the 1960s to which Godfrey does not refer suggests on the whole, despite the dissent of some sober and honest critics, that both of these criteria have been met.

The apparent decision of the University of Toronto Press to allow this important work to go out of print, along with the inclusion of the work and *The Bias of Communication* in a number of undergraduate communication courses in Canada, would seem to provide the rationale for publishing a new edition of the work. The new format is large and heavy, unlike the light, portable but densely-printed UofT paperback, and should appeal to the strong, younger reader because
of its pictures, big print and new subheadings. Those alarmingly-long paragraphs have been broken up to make the text more "user-friendly." The question remains whether Godfrey succeeds in his avowed purpose to "help the average reader to see why Innis remains important" without compromising the integrity of Innis' work.

The republishing of any original academic work, which *Empire and Communication* most definitely is, usually occurs to incorporate clarifications from earlier or later drafts of the work, to provide accuracy in the notes, to explain terms or references which have become obscure with time, or to bring older works into line with the editorial conventions of the 20th century. In the case of this book, some editorial changes were incorporated into subsequent printings after Innis' own marginal notes in his first edition (1950) copy. This is explained in Mary Quayle Innis' Editorial Note reprinted in the 1972 edition. However, neither her note nor McLuhan's Introduction appears in this edition. The former, at least, is surprising, since Mrs. Innis' incorporation of Innis' corrected notes and marginalia has been preserved, unacknowledged, in this edition. Godfrey's own editorial work consists of the insertion of subheadings, an arguable practice here, since this is not after a modern edition of *Gulliver's Travels* or Vico's *New Science* whose original formats would be pointlessly puzzling to non-specialists, and the addition of some illustrations. The subheadings disrupt the text in ways which Innis clearly did not intend and they fragment, rather than clarify, "the framework of Innis' thought." Godfrey has also written a new Foreword and Afterword, as well as short synopses of the contents of each chapter.

Illustrations can certainly help to illuminate or clarify references in the text. They can also, legitimately, be decorative and diversionary, in the finest traditions of printing. This book is peppered with pictures, a very few of which are beautiful and most not well reproduced. Too many are also obscure. Where the printing devices of German or English printers are presented in the margins of the chapter "Printing and the Printing Press" (a good idea) it would be helpful to explain the complex iconography, the cultural context, and the use of these signs. As it is, the reader becomes aware of more, not fewer lacunae in her understanding of the period. Often, more questions are raised than are answered and the opportunity to clarify Innis' text, in which these topics occur, is lost.

The Afterword provides Godfrey with the occasion to reveal his own interest in Innis, which is to examine whether telematics will contribute to centralization or decentralization of communication. He argues that the technology has decentralizing potential on the margins, giving as an example Calgary school children printing their own books with the aid of Apple computers, but that the strength of industrial monopoly in tandem with political forces may not lead us in that direction. These observations are irritatingly expressed in the jargon of the falling unit price of megabytes—how one misses the delicate irony of Innis' use
of political-economic terms in his discussions of culture—and other expressions of the mega-trend sort. They do not contribute to understanding Innis; they are neither wild nor breathtaking.

Most regrettable is the absence of references to the commentary on Innis published over the 20 years, e.g., James Carey and others whose works have proven useful in "explaining" and contextualizing Innis for undergraduates and specialists alike. A critical bibliography or bibliographical essay along with Innis' text would have been more genuinely helpful than the sort of pseudo-Annotated Alice that this edition of *Empire and Communications* has become. It is shameful that the University of Toronto Press did not value Innis' work more highly, and that readers of Innis must now live with Godfrey's threat that "thanks to the latest in digital and laser technology...it will NEVER be out of print again."

Reviewed by: Alison Beale
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1. Interview, March, 1987
2. *Empire and Communication* (Toronto: UofT Press, 1972) P. V.
3. Ibid., p. 9.

*History and Present Status of Community Radio in Québec*
Mark Stiles and Jacques Lachance, Stiles Associates Inc. Toronto: Ministry of Culture and Communications, 1988

*Community Radio in Ontario: A Dynamic Resource - An Uncertain Future*
Kealy Wilkinson and Associates Toronto: Ministry of Culture and Communications, 1988

These two reports on the status of community radio in Ontario and Québec were commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Culture as a research base from which to launch a community radio policy. This initiative will be welcomed by practitioners, policy makers and scholars in the field of third sector media in Canada. The studies are similar in scope, though dealing with quite different provincial policy environments. Both review existing provincial and federal policy on community media, describe the development of community radio in each province, compile a current statistical picture of the size and budgets of operating stations, present case studies of representative stations and outline present provincial and federal funding programs. This material is organised primarily around questions of funding and administration with less emphasis on programming or on community radio's social and cultural impact.