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Foreword

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The Toronto School and Communication Research

The "Toronto School" insists that the technologies of the media of communication are far more influential than their content. Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan are not alone in making this claim, and not the earliest, but they have done so more provocatively and more persistently than others. What's more they argue that media technologies have a dominant influence not just on individuals but on social structure and culture, and not just in modern times but from the beginning. Their writings have attracted much interest – and fierce debate – but only little systematic research. If they are right, communications media deserve a central place in the history of civilizations, and communication research ought to rise to the challenge.

But it hasn't. The bigness of these claims – and the pride of place which they offer to the media – contrasts sharply with the conclusion of "limited effects" echoed repeatedly in studies of mass persuasion. These studies of media "campaigns" can be traced to the theory of mass society, suggesting that the atomized individuals of the early 20th century would be vulnerable – as if by remote control – to the ostensibly powerful appeals of broadcasters. However, the empirical research that set out to test this assumption – at Columbia (Klapper, 1960) and at Yale (Hovland, 1959) – found that it is far from easy to change opinions, attitudes and actions, and, moreover, that modern individuals are less isolated or alienated than was assumed. The claims of mainstream communications research became much more modest as a result.

The doctrine of limited effects has been challenged by various groups, especially by so-called "critical theorists" – best known among whom are the members of the Frankfurt School. They argue (1) that media effects are better conceptualized as protracted, rather than short run, processes; (2) that the media are more effective in the "cultivation" of

values and images rather than in campaigns of "persuasion" aimed at entrenched attitudes and habits, a position with which cognitive theorists would agree; (3) that the primary effect of the media is to be sought in reinforcement of the status quo – that is, in non-change or the slowing of change rather than in accelerating change; and (4) that the message of the media derives from the interests of their owners and controllers, a position that parallels that of certain political economists. Even this call for a return to a conception of "powerful effects," however, assigns paramount influence to the content of the media. With certain important exceptions (Benjamin, 1968, for example), they are only marginally interested in other attributes of the media – their technologies, for example, or the locus in which they are consumed (Freidson, 1953; Katz & Popescu, 2004).

Technological theorists agree that the influence of the media is a long-run affair, so much so that the predominant medium of a given time and place leaves its indelible mark on personality and culture and social organization. Thus, McLuhan thinks of the linearity of print as having created linear personalities, inner-directed, formalistic and ascetic. He thinks of print as an unambiguously "hot" medium, delivering messages that add intensity and drive to culture, while television is ambiguous and "cool," inviting more meaning-making, more relaxed participation (in the subconscious activity of connecting the pixels) and offering immediate gratification. Unlike mainstream researchers who consider the abstractness of print more involving than the literalness of television, when McLuhan says "the medium is the message" he means that the technology of each new medium habituates the mind to a particular kind of decoding that shapes personality and culture.

For McLuhan, these predominant habits of mind also affect social organization. He associates the linearity of railroads and assembly lines with print, and sees the decentralization of the working place as a function of the diffuseness of electronic technology. Drawing on ancient history, Innis, too, links the bureaucratic centralization of Egypt with the invention of portable papyrus and written script so that orders from the Pharaoh at the center could be speedily transported up and down the Nile. For his part, Innis characterizes the media as space-biased and time-biased. Space-biased media expand the influence of empires and civilizations, while time-biased media – such as pyramids – are transmitted over time, from generation to generation. He believed

that the two orientations needed to be continually equilibrated in order for a society to survive.

This radical breakthrough in thinking about media effects was made, not surprisingly, by "outsiders" – in both nationality and discipline. The technological theories of McLuhan, Innis and their associates hail from Canada, a land dependent on its innovative media technology for spanning vast territory and outlying settlements, and for differentiating itself from its southern neighbor. Meanwhile, private enterprise in the United States was creating a "culture industry" along with its technology.

Neither McLuhan nor Innis came from the social psychological tradition that reigned in mainstream (that is, American) communication research. McLuhan entered media studies through a side door and stormed onto center stage. A scholar trained in English literature, he shifted from an initial interest in media content to put all his weight on form (which would have won the approval of his Cambridge mentors) and on technology (Katz & Katz, in this volume). McLuhan was a great hit among executives of the culture industry, and attracted considerable attention from humanists (though not from social scientists), who initially warmed to his poetic provocations and then cooled down. His renown has also had ups and downs – and ups. In the process, Toronto became known as the center for the study of the social effects of media technologies.

Harold Innis, the economist, also entered through a side door, but his interest in the economics of nation building pointed him to the role of media and to close affiliation with McLuhan, more as mentor than collaborator. Nevertheless, there remains a significant territory of concurrence between the two. McLuhan agreed with Innis that word of mouth is a medium of "heart," favoring the communication of practical wisdom across generations – hence tradition and religion, as in Innis' notion of time-binding media. Print, on the other hand – an extension of the eye for McLuhan – is a medium of "mind." It favors the communication of specialized knowledge, hence nationalism and empire – reaffirming Innis' analysis of space-binding media. McLuhan's "global village" is a prophecy that sees the revival of oral culture in television and a welcome liberation from the tribalism of radio and the imperialism of print. McLuhan was not in love with television, however; he only hated it less than print.

Untimely death spared Innis from having to analytically confront television. He most likely would have seen it as the overextension of media of space, at the expense of the necessary balance with media of time. Given his pessimism, Innis might well have seen television as a force leading to a catastrophic growth of the spell of space, destined to bring down the over-biased civilizations snared by its charms.

Both Toronto scholars have left the effects of the avalanche of new media technologies in the latter 20th century to be studied by successors. But the early ripples they made indicate the productivity of their approach to media research. More in the spirit of Innis than McLuhan, technological theory has enlisted many first rank researchers: Goody and Watt (1968) have spelled out the effects of transition from orality to literacy; Eisenstein (1979) has explored the effect of the printing press on religion, science, and scholarship; Tarde (1901) credits the newspaper with the rise of the public; Carey (1989) has shown how the telegraph affected the economic integration of the United States; Gouldner (1976) suggests that the proliferation of paper created a need for ideology; Meyrowitz (1985) argues that television's accessibility has lowered the boundaries that separate generations, genders, classes, etc. Rather than wild speculation, each of these theories is specific about the particular attribute of media technology (the fixedness of print, the accessibility of television, the simultaneity of the telegraph) that is responsible for the hypothesized effect.

As a group, technological theories can be mapped in two related ways. McLuhan and his later adherents proposed to understand media as vehicles/engines of (a) change (b) in the mental processing (c) of individuals (d) in the long-run (e) as a result of unique technological attributes of the different media. This combines with the emphasis laid by Innis and developed by his followers on conceptualizing media's ultimate effects as (a) change (b) in social organization (c) of societies and institutions (d) in the long-run (e) in response to shifting media ecologies. Either of these approaches thus posits that the introduction of new media technologies is destined to bring about thoroughgoing and long-lasting change. The interpretation, extension, and application of these proposition – the three parts of this present volume – is surely called for as contemporary society is coming to grips with an avalanche of new media technologies introduced at the turn of the second millennium.

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