Innis and the Emergence of

Canadian Communication/Media Studies

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Abstract:

The discussion in this paper examines the influence of Harold Innis' medium theory on contemporary media and communication scholarship in Canada and abroad. The methodological construction of Innis' medium theory comprises several dimensions including: media bias; the exercising of power through the use and control of media; the bias of communication media toward favouring control over space and control through time; the role of governance in overcoming the bias inherent in media; a materialist understanding of civilizations; space-media outpacing time-media; and dialectics. In this paper particular attention is given to two issues. The first is the connections between Innis' political economy approach and the work of Marshall McLuhan on the one hand, and the ecological studies of David Suzuki on the other. Both McLuhan and Suzuki, it is argued, may be seen as filling in important gaps in Innis' work. The second focuses on the reasons why Innis' medium theory has struck a chord with the Canadian psyche. This stands in stark contrast to the apparent neglect of Innis' work within American media and communication scholarship.

Keywords: Harold Innis; Marshall McLuhan; David Suzuki; Medium Theory; Media Bias; Civilizations; Political Economy Approach

Résumé:

Cet article examine l'influence de la théorie des médias élaborée par Harold Innis sur la mission professorale des médias contemporains et de la communication au Canada ainsi qu'à l'étranger. La démarche méthodologique de la théorie des médias de Innis comprend plusieurs aspects essentiels : le biais des médias; la pratique du pouvoir à travers l'utilisation et le contrôle des médias; le biais des médias de communication qui favorise le contrôle de l'espace et du temps; le rôle de la gouvernance pour contrer le biais intrinsèque des médias; la vision matérialiste des civilisations; la dynamique média-espace qui surpasse la dynamique média-temps et la dialectique. Dans cet article, une attention particulière est accordée à deux sujets. Le premier est d'abord le lien entre l'approche d'économie politique de Innis et le travail de Marshall McLuhan ainsi que les études écologiques de David Suzuki. L'auteur défend l'idée que les travaux de McLuhan et de Suzuki complètent certaines omissions importantes retrouvées dans les oeuvres de Innis. Le deuxième met l'accent pour les raisons pour lesquelles la théorie des médias de Innis a eu un impact sur la psyché canadienne. Cet objet est à l'écart de l'absence des travaux de Innis dans la mission professorale de l'étude des médias et des communications en Amérique.

Mots-clés: Harold Innis; Marshall McLuhan; David Suzuki; Théorie des Médias Élaborée; Biais des Médias; Civilisations; Approche d'Économie Politique

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Canadian communication/media studies began in earnest in the period between 1946 and 1952. It was then that Harold Adams Innis (1894–1952) switched his research foci from the staples theory of Canadian economic history and contemporary issues in Canadian political economy to the significance of media and communication in world history. In his preface to *Empire and Communications*, the first of his three media books,[1] Innis remarked that celebrated writers like Kroeber, Mead, Marx, Mosca, Pareto, Sorokin, Spengler, Toynbee and Veblen had understood, albeit usually implicitly, media and communication as being of central importance to the shaping of modern civilization. Innis then declared that his goal was to develop a more explicit and detailed understanding of the implications of communication for civilization (Innis, 1972: xiii). Specifically, he would attempt "to outline the significance of communication in a small number of empires as a means of understanding its role in a general sense" (Innis, 1972: 6). Innis, in effect, was attempting a grand work of synthesis—in the words of his biographer, "a stupendous comparative investigation of the interrelations of communications with politics, economics, and religion, throughout history and over the entire world" (Creighton, 1957: 121).

Innis certainly was not the first to theorize about communication or media . In antiquity, Plato, Aristotle and Cicero, among others, had analyzed rhetoric, the art of persuasion. With regard to the modern era, arguably, communication/media studies were inaugurated by Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure early in the twentieth century (Babe, 2009: 162–71, 197–99). However, some intellectual historians point instead to the writings of "Chicago School" theorists,

namely John Dewey, Robert Park and Charles Cooley (Czitrom, 1982; Carey, 1996); others, with a more positivist bent, point to administrative-empirical writers like Paul Lazarsfeld, Harold Lasswell, and Wilbur Schramm. Even in Canada, Innis was not first. Nearly twenty years prior to his media writings, Graham Spry, for instance, was advocating public broadcasting in venues like *The Queen's Quarterly* (Babe, 2000).

Innis, though, was both heuristic and an original. He helped to inaugurate a unique approach to communication/media studies, namely critical political economy, into which he integrated seamlessly what is today known as critical cultural studies (Babe, 2009).[2] His political economy approach often is known as *medium theory*. It designates a research approach and theoretical stance whereby media and communication are placed at the very centre of world and local historical analyses.[3] Innis' media work is of much greater volume, and is more theoretical/abstract than Graham Spry's. It deals prominently with power relations, a topic routinely and meticulously avoided by mainstream American writers. It also provides a non-Marxist alternative to, but is surprising consistent with, the writings of the Frankfurt School (Babe, 2009).

Beginnings are seldom easy. As a result of his research and publications prior to turning his attention to media in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Innis had become Canada's most acclaimed academic. He was president of both the Canadian and American economics associations and of the Royal Society of Canada, for example. During those very same final years, however, he struggled alone, virtually an outcast in developing his media work (Havelock, 1982: 25). According to his biographer "it would be difficult to exaggerate the degree of intellectual isolation in which the communications works were composed" (Watson, 2006: 250). The conventional wisdom at the time was that Innis "was out of his 'depth' in dealing with communication" (Ibid: 251).

Even today, more than a half century later, outside of Canada Innis is still largely ignored. In their recent historical surveys of radical media criticism, Scott and McChesney, for example, leave unmentioned one of the U.S. press's most original and trenchant critics, one Harold Adams Innis (McChesney & Scott, 2004; Scott & McChesney, 2006). Innis likewise is not mentioned in either the index or the references of James Beniger's otherwise excellent book, *The Control Revolution*, the irony here being that Beniger is quite Innisian in positioning media at the centre of his historical analysis. In what purports to be a detailed review of the communication literature in historical perspective, Jesse Delia did little better, according Innis just one brief mention (Delia, 1987: 37). As for Vincent Mosco (an American residing and teaching in Canada), he afforded Innis only two brief sentences in his *The Political Economy of Communication* (Mosco, 1996).

In Canada, of course, Innis' media writings are far from neglected. Ironically, though, even here his work on media owes its contemporary life to dubious[4] endorsements by his erstwhile disciple, Marshall McLuhan, and to thirty years of exegeses of a quintessentially American scholar, James W. Carey.

The easiest, but least satisfactory explanation as to why Innis' writings, and the medium theory he generated, are today accepted only (or at least primarily) in Canada would be that contemporary Canadian media scholars are unduly biased (a favourite Innisian term) through their identification with Innis' nationality. I have argued elsewhere, however, that Innis in fact generated, or better anticipated, a distinctly Canadian mode of media scholarship that can even be recognized in the analyses of property by political philosopher Crawford B. Macpherson, in the ecological studies of David Suzuki, in the literary criticism of Northrop Frye, in the

technology critique by George Grant, and in elements of the political philosophy of John Ralston Saul (Babe, 2000; Babe, 2009). These are all scholars of the first order. Space does not permit drawing all these and other connections here. Nor would all those listed necessarily have been conscious of their Innisian lineage. Nonetheless, the essential point is that although Innis somehow struck a responsive chord with a large swathe of Canadian scholarship, he has failed thus far to resonate in the USA or overseas, even though his resonance in Canada assuredly goes well beyond media studies narrowly considered.

In this paper I will address both the Innis-McLuhan connection (that being undoubtedly the most important for the emergence of Canadian media scholarship), and the Innis-Suzuki connection (to exemplify Innis' current, broad importance). Both McLuhan and Suzuki, moreover, can be understood as filling gaps in Innis' work. I will then conclude by reflecting on the resonance Innis' medium theory has struck with the Canadian psyche, and on reasons for his neglect in the United States.

Innis' Medium Thesis

There are several essential aspects to Innis' medium thesis:

First, although concentrating certainly on orality and various modes of writing, Innis at one time or another considered also roads, railways, canals, money, skyscrapers, beaver pelts, lumber, electricity, and fish to be media of communication. This broad understanding of media, incidentally, is totally in accord with McLuhan's approach, and moreover it opens up and justifies comparing Innis with other scholars like Suzuki, Saul, Macpherson and Frye who are not usually thought of as media/communication scholars. *Media for Innis (as for McLuhan) are what come between humans to enable and affect (or "bias") their interactions* (Innis, 1972: 2–11).

Second, for Innis, governance entails communication, and communication requires media. Power is exercised through the use and control of media. Control can be understood as comprising two dimensions, namely control over space and control through time. Space concerns the geographic extent of control (empire), while time indicates endurance or duration. Control in both senses entails and requires substantial control over the predominant media of communication, which is to say over the means of mediating human interactions. Control through time entails control over the customs, legends, myths, languages, symbolisms, religions, ideals, beliefs, and so forth, of a people. Control over space requires the capacity to instantaneously dispatch orders and to be apprised as to whether they are being carried out, to monitor conditions from afar and to respond accordingly. Both dimensions of control entail control or influence over society's systems of valuation (i.e. modes of delineating relative importance), and over its conceptualizations of time and of space. Innis was, then, a political economist who understood that governance necessarily impacts upon cultural systems—including ontologies, language, modes of valuation, and conceptions of time and space. For Innis, control of culture is a necessity to achieve and maintain political-economic power. For Innis, control not only of the vernacular, but also of scholarship, is key to political-economic power.

Third, media of communication are intrinsically biased toward favouring control over space or control through time. The time-space bias of any particular medium is given, in part, by its physical properties. Innis wrote:

> Media that emphasize time are those that are durable in character, such as parchment, clay, and stone. The heavy materials are suited to the development of architecture and sculpture. Media that emphasize space are apt to be less durable and light in character, such as papyrus and paper. The latter are suited to wide areas in administration and trade.
>
> (Innis, 1972: 7)

However, Innis was not a hard technological or media determinist.[5] He maintained, rather, that a medium's influence in terms of space or time must be understood within "the social-economic context of [its] use" (Comor, 1994: 112). Although paper was invented in China centuries before its use became common in Europe, for example, the political-economic conditions in ancient China coupled with the absence of a phonetic alphabet meant that paper in China did not have the dramatic space-bias that it later had in Europe. Innis used such terms and phrases as "bias," "hastens," "facilitates," and "helps to define," to indicate that media emphasize, but do not determine.

Fourth, the task of proper governance is, in part, to overcome the bias inherent to media predominant at any particular time: "Large-scale political organizations such as empires … persist by overcoming the bias of media which over-emphasize either [the time or space] dimension," Innis wrote (Innis, 1972: 7). Accordingly, empires that flourish tend to be those influenced by more than one medium whereby "the bias of one … is offset by the bias of another" (Ibid). Over recorded history, according to Innis, there has been a continuing oscillation between the exigencies of space and of time, whereby "civilizations mature as they achieve an equilibrium between the two, and dissolve into new forms as equilibrium dissolved" (Havelock, 1982: 30–31).

Fifth, Innis anchored his theory in the material conditions of a society or civilization. For example, in ancient Egypt hieroglyphics carved in stone favoured a priesthood ruling a time-bound society, whereas use of papyrus later benefited a scribal class and encouraged mathematics and science. The Roman conquest of Egypt, in turn, "gave access to supplies of papyrus, which became the basis of a large administrative empire" (Innis, 1972: 7). Innis described himself as a "dirt economist," indicating his penchant to secure materialist explanations.

Sixth, in contemporary society, space-biased media (the press, radio) were seen by Innis as outpacing time-binding media (orality, books, architecture); connections with the past were becoming weak, as was a concern for the future. Innis termed this perilous condition, "present mindedness." He maintained that present mindedness was signaling the demise of western civilization. He exclaimed, "The balance between time and space has been seriously disturbed with disastrous consequences to Western civilization" (Innis, 1971: 76).

Innis' Method

In Innis' medium theory we can identify a number of features that characterize large swathes of Canadian scholarship and which differentiate it from its mainstream American counterpart. First, Innis' writings are dialectical. Time/space, centripetal/centrifugal forces, monopolies of knowledge challenged from the periphery, colonized/colonizers, orality/writing, linear/dialectical logic are just a few of the tensions and contradictions that inform his media analysis. Innis, however, was neither Hegelian nor Marxist. For him, the cessation of contradiction, that is a

termination of the dialectic, was not to be desired. In his dialectics, rather, Innis drew upon the classics, borrowing from the Greeks the ideal of proportion or balance. Most importantly, Innis emphasized both the desirability and difficulty of attaining, *and maintaining*, tension between space and time as societal organizing principles (and, by implication, between the classes or groups supporting these divergent principles). He regarded in apocalyptic terms the current imbalance whereby space is overwhelming time. Innisian "balance," then, is not one of harmony or stability. Rather, it is dynamic, ever shifting, wrought by struggle and tension, achieved through countervailing power or opposition. According to Robin Neill, Innisian balance means competition; "its opposite is monopoly" (Neill, 1972: 100).

A second feature of Innis' writings is his emphasis on mediation, and hence his broad understanding of media. In his view, whatever orients people toward the past and the future, or conversely induces them to disregard the past and the future, is a medium of communication. By this understanding, media are intrinsically biased either toward time or toward space; if there is no "bias," there is no medium. One can do little to correct bias within a medium. It is only the countervailing tendencies of multiple media that can ensure Innisian balance.

Third, Innis was a political economist. Considerations of disparities in political, economic, communicatory, and cultural power permeate his writings. His innovative genius was to interrelate and systematize these various dimensions of power and their contestations through medium theory. For him, control of media is a prerequisite to political-economic power. Political-economic power is achieved and maintained, in part, through the control of culture, which in turn requires control of media.

Fourth, Innis was, if anything, a holistic thinker. Whereas much contemporary scholarship addresses individual acts of communication, from which conclusions regarding communicatory processes are inferred, Innis theorized connections between media and civilization change.

Innis and McLuhan

One can hardly imagine two more disparate scholars than Innis and McLuhan. The former a hard nosed, agnostic, a self-proclaimed "dirt economist" who insisted on materialist explanations for whatever he studied. The latter a literary critic steeped in Joyce, Elliot and Pound, who delighted in his own wit and rhetorical flourishes, religiously devout with mystical explanations at the back of his mind for everything, and one who longed for cosmic consciousness as opposed to contemplating oppressive monopolies of knowledge. Nonetheless, McLuhan claimed instant recognition upon reading Innis for the first time, which he did after learning that Innis had placed his book, *The Mechanical Bride*, on his course reading list (McLuhan, 1982: 10). What charmed McLuhan in Innis' later scholarship was precisely what most contemporaries found lacking:

> Without having studied modern art and poetry, [Innis] yet discovered how to arrange his insights in patterns that nearly resemble the art forms of our time. Innis presents insights in a mosaic structure of seemingly unrelated and disproportioned sentences and aphorisms…. He expects the reader to make discovery after discovery that he himself had missed.
>
> (McLuhan, 1971: vii)

McLuhan added that instead of assuming a "point of view," Innis threw together seemingly unrelated, unconnected insights and facts, the interaction among which gave rise to a kind of "mutual irritation," mimicking the "natural form of conversation or dialogue rather than of written discourse" (McLuhan, 1971: viii). Innis' biographer, Alexander John Watson agrees, claiming that by comprising his final three books largely of speeches, as opposed to composing one major work of synthesis, Innis attempted "a defence of the oral tradition" (Watson, 2006: 260).

This may well be true. But in addition, Innis' "aphoristic and disconnected" style (Havelock, 1982: 29) was surely a consequence of his prodigious research, his penchant for detail, and the formidable difficulty of structuring the mounds of data he had amassed. Innis read "obsessively" and excerpted extensively (Ibid). The floors of his office at the university and his study at home were covered with "open books and piles of notes, each pile with a scrap of paper on the top containing an index to the contents" (Christian, 1980: vii). The notes, excerpts, and ideas were then combined to comprise his lectures and book chapters (Havelock, 1982: 29). Given this as background, it is indeed ironic that McLuhan's own expository style was so similar to Innis'. According to Hugh Kenner; the function of facts for McLuhan was "like dust, to make insight visible" (Kenner, 1969: 27). Less charitably, Dwight Macdonald complained that McLuhan indiscriminately mixed distorted facts with "facts that are not facts" (MacDonald, 1969: 32). McLuhan claimed his style of written exposition mimicked the simultaneity of electric media and illustrated his contention that the print medium's linearity had become anachronistic.

Similarity in expository style, however, is far from the most important element linking Innis and McLuhan, for in the substance of his thought McLuhan may be regarded as filling a gap in Innis' work. In his medium thesis, as we have seen, Innis focused on the dialectic of medium and message. Depending on the physical properties of any given medium, it is predisposed to transmit either time-binding or space-binding messages, thereby supporting elites whose power is based on the particular monopoly of knowledge made conducive by the prevailing medium. However, Innis neglected (but not entirely!)[6] reception and interpretation. McLuhan, too, was a medium theorist who drew attention to the interplay of medium and message. Rather than drawing connections between message encoding and the medium, however, McLuhan proposed connections between the medium and "biases" in interpretation (decoding). McLuhan maintained that media, being extensions or amplifications of the senses, affect interpretation/perception in broadly predictable ways. For example, he attributed the predominance of linear logic vs. analogic reasoning to the preponderance in any given culture of media extending (amplifying) the power of the eye or of the ear respectively. Linear logic, according to McLuhan, derives from the (illusion of) connectedness in visual space, whereas analogy, due to gaps inherent to audile/tactile space, is more common in cultures emphasizing hearing. It is from gaps or intervals, not connections, that knowledge of proportions, and hence analogies stem. It is worth quoting McLuhan on this important insight:

> Perhaps the most precious possession of man is his abiding awareness of the analogy of proper proportionality, the key to all metaphysical insight and perhaps the very condition of consciousness itself. This analogical awareness is constituted of a perpetual play of ratios: A is to B what C is to D, which is to say that the ratio between A and B is proportioned to the ratio between C and D, there being a ratio between these ratios as well. This lively awareness of the most exquisite delicacy depends upon there being no connection whatever between the

components. If A were linked to B, or C to D, mere logic would take the place of analogical perception.

(McLuhan & Parker, 1968: 240)

Apart from their differing emphases on encoding and decoding, McLuhan departed from Innis in even more fundamental ways. Whereas Innis maintained that the materiality of media had direct consequences on the symbolic (communicatory) realm, McLuhan's position was precisely the reverse. From his perspective as literary critic, McLuhan viewed media technologies as manifesting in the material world the same operations as occur in language. For example, McLuhan maintained that at high intensity, media flip into their opposites, a transformation referred to in literary studies as *chiasmus*. Innis, to the contrary, never argued that a space-binding medium pushed to the limit becomes time-binding! McLuhan claimed that other rhetorical operations, too (metaphor, cliché, and archetype) have wide applicability in the non verbal world. His justification for adopting this literary approach to media analysis was that language is a technology (i.e., an applied artifact), and hence it can properly be compared to other artifacts or technologies. "Anything that can be observed about the behavior of linguistic cliché or archetype," McLuhan wrote, "can be found plentifully in the nonlinguistic world" (McLuhan & Watson, 1971: 20). McLuhan was fond of invoking the following lines by the poet, William Butler Yeats (from "The Circus Animals' Desertion"), to emphasize that poets and inventors (wordsmiths and technologists) are alike in recycling refuse to forge new creations:

> *Those masterful images because complete*
> *Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?*
> *A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,*
> *Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,*
> *Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut*
> *Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,*
> *I must lie down where all the ladders start,*
> In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

Eventually, McLuhan formalized his literary approach to media technologies by proposing four "laws," which he formulated as questions: (1) What does the medium enhance or intensify? (2) What does the medium obsolesce or displace? (3) What does the medium retrieve that was previously obsolesced? (4) What does the medium produce or become when pressed to an extreme? (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988).

Considered separately, Innis and McLuhan are highly heuristic. Juxtaposed and interrelated, they provide new richness of insight, and constitute a bulwark against both poststructuralist dematerializations and undue economistic determinisms (Babe, 2009). Integrating the media theses of Innis and McLuhan is a propitious way of integrating social science and literary approaches to communication and media studies—of reintegrating political economy and cultural studies (Ibid).

Innis and Suzuki [7]

Even more congruent with Innis' medium thesis are aspects of the environmental writings of broadcaster, author, geneticist and ecologist, David Suzuki. While likely unaware of Innis as an

intellectual forebear, Suzuki nonetheless has consistently applied the Innisian time-space media dialectic in addressing people's relations with the environment. Whereas Innis illustrated the time-space media dialectic through myriad examples culled from world history, Suzuki does this by contrasting the mindsets of indigenous peoples with the modern West. Like Innis, Suzuki draws connections between differences in culture (differences in conceptions of time and of space) on the one hand, and predominance of different media of communication and patterns of their control (monopolies of knowledge) on the other. Let us begin by describing Suzuki's depiction of cultures in terms of conceptions of time.

Suzuki judges a society's conception of time to be "one of the pillars of its worldview, its shared ideas and images that grant order and meaning to the universe" (Knudston & Suzuki, 1992: 142). He repeatedly contrasts two disparate notions of time. One, termed "the pre-scientific conception," is similar to Innisian "time-bias." According to Suzuki, the "pre-scientific mind," which was widespread in Europe before Copernicus and still characterizes the mindset of many indigenous peoples about the globe, affirms the importance of continuity and in particular the dependence of succeeding generations on the actions of their forebears. Some variants of the pre-scientific mindset endow humans with responsibility even for keeping the stars on their courses (Suzuki & McConnell, 1997: 11). The pre-scientific mind also pays close attention to recurrent natural rhythms. Some of nature's cycles are held to be sacred and steeped in signs and significance, and people participate symbolically in these recurrences through rituals.

The media of communication that imbue pre-scientific peoples with mythic notions of time, Suzuki observed, have traditionally been songs, ceremonies, and stories (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992: 145). For the Gitksan of central British Columbia, for example, each household is the proud heir of an *ada'ox*—the "body of orally transmitted songs and stories that acts as the house's sacred archives and as its living, millennia-long memory of important events of the past"—an "irreplaceable verbal repository of knowledge." It consists in part of sacred songs believed to have arisen "from the breaths of ancestors." According to Suzuki and co-author Peter Knudtson: "These songs serve as vital time-traversing vehicles. They can transport members across the immense reaches of space and time into the dim mythic past of Gitksan creation by the very quality of their music and the emotions they convey" (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992: 128). Cyclical time, Suzuki continues, bestows the notion that we are all parts of a seamless web of interconnectivity and interdependence through time and space—that we live in future generations and they in us.

The opposite conception of time, according to Suzuki, is the western scientific tradition of "time's arrow"—the idea that time is linear, sequential, and unidirectional (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992: 143). This resembles Innis' depiction of time for space-biased societies. Suzuki writes that although science recognizes natural cycles and rhythms—the solar seasons, fluctuations of predator and prey populations, replication cycles of DNA—these expressions of cyclical time are conceived to exist only within the grander framework of linear time—for example, the relentless increase in entropy and linear chains of cause-and-effect (Ibid). Western notions of linear time, by marginalizing cyclical or mythic time, have helped demolish "the intellectual and moral order of the Western world" as nothing is thought to remain the same (Suzuki & McConnell, 1997: 13); thereby they have helped initiate the severe environmental problems we experience today.

According to Suzuki, we in the west are beset by what Innis called present mindedness. We think little of the past and have few concerns over what may transpire in the distant future. He writes, the "bottom line is often a weekly paycheque or an annual return on investment.

Political reality is dictated by a horizon measured in months or a few years." Indeed, "linear time underlies our most cherished notions of 'progress'—our collective faith in the inexorable, incremental refinement of human society, technology, and thought" (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992: 143). This explains why it is difficult to mesh economic and political deadlines with nature's time needs.

Not only are David Suzuki's pronouncements on time consistent with Innis' medium thesis, they fill a gap in Innis' work. Although Innis certainly was familiar with North American indigenous cultures, as evidenced by his book on the fur trade, his analysis of the biases of oral communication, in the opinion of Paul Heyer, "ultimately suffers from the exclusivity of constructing a model based on one source: the ancient Greeks" (2003: 71). Heyer explains that Innis' work "evidences no discussion of the phenomenon as evidenced in the prestate societies of sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and the New World" (Ibid). Suzuki, therefore, can be regarded as, in a sense, completing or fulfilling this aspect of Innis' work.

Suzuki is also Innisian when he assesses the time bias inherent to modern media. When Suzuki first became a broadcast journalist, he hoped that through his craft he would enable viewers to experience nature in a way that would inspire them to love it. Later he understood that this could not be so: "Now I realize that my programs, too, are a creation, not a reflection of reality… Back in the editing room, hours of this hard-earned film are boiled down to sequences of sensational shot after sensational shot"(Suzuki & Dressel, 1999: 79). He continues,

> What's missing in the filmed version of nature is *time*. Nature must have time, but television cannot tolerate it. So we create a virtual reality, a collage of images that conveys a distorted sense of what a real wilderness is like.
>
> (Ibid)

For Suzuki, the "time-distortion" of modern media is not trivial. By instilling an impression that nature can move quickly, media cause people to harbor unrealistic expectations: "Fish, trees or soil microorganisms don't grow fast enough for our speedy timeframe. But if the programs we create give an impression of a hopped-up nature, we might expect it to be able to meet our ever-faster needs" (Ibid). He suggests that although our rates of extracting resources— trees, fish, top soil, clean water—are harmonious with the speed of our information technologies and the economy, they are certainly "not in synch with the reproductive rates of natural systems." Suzuki concludes: "More and more our sources of information are no longer connected to the natural world and its limits" (Ibid).[8]

Like Innis, who pleaded for "balance" between time and space in order that society would neither become stagnant nor fall into chaos, Suzuki insists that we need to integrate these rival ways of understanding time. By conceiving time as a spiral, rather than as a circle or as a straight line, he writes, we could synthesize the cyclical or mythic with the linear, scientific notions, making us more aware than at present of the "simultaneous spin of nature's seasons within time's trajectory"—a necessity, he concludes, if we are to survive (Knudston & Suzuki, 1992: 145).[9]

Suzuki, like Innis, connects control of media to culture as manifested in conceptions of time. According to Suzuki, media are purposefully propagandistic in imparting a worldview consistent with the short term interests of their controllers. He explains:

In our view, the media pour out stories that are full of assumptions and values in the guise of objective value-free reporting. Most programming on television simply takes for granted our right to exploit nature as we see fit, to dominate the planet, to increase our consumption, to create more economic growth, to dump our wastes into the environment. Few object to these assumptions because they are so deeply set in our culture that they are accepted as obvious truths. However, they are biases nevertheless. Yet the minute a natural history film takes a strong environmental position that questions these beliefs, it is immediately criticized and bombarded with the demand to present "the other side".

(Suzuki, 1987: 263)

Acceptance and Neglect

In *Canadian Communication Thought* (Babe, 2000) I suggested several reasons why the mode of analysis inaugurated by Innis (dialectical, holistic, emphasis on mediation, critical), and pursued by such eminent scholars as George Grant, Crawford B. Macpherson, Northrop Frye, and as just seen, by David Suzuki, is in harmony with Canadian outlooks and is estranged from American ways of thinking. Here I will briefly summarize but two of these.

First, American mainstream media scholarship consistently (and insistently) avoids addressing disparities in communicatory power (Babe, 2006; Babe, 2009). The continuous neglect of power in mainstream American media scholarship over a period of nearly 100 years is evident despite the fact (or more accurately, one suspects, *due* to the fact) that communication and culture have long been central to American wealth generation, governance, and foreign policy. To draw attention to international asymmetries in communicatory and cultural power would be to question implicitly the legitimacy or justness of these asymmetries. Mainstream empirical research in the United States was funded by the military, beginning from the 1930s, augmenting already existing tendencies for a less than critical literature (Simpson, 1994; Pooley, 2008). By way of contrast, Canada has had few international ambitions for empire, and indeed her struggle for sovereignty has entailed resistance (albeit feeble) to American media incursions.

Similarly, for American scholarship to draw attention to domestic concentrations of media power and to the role of advertising in "filtering" news and other content would be tantamount to questioning the existence or efficacy of democracy in this self-proclaimed beacon onto the world. (This is not to imply that there is not a vital critical scholarship in the United States which points to asymmetries in communicatory power; unlike in Canada, however, this critical scholarship has always been, and remains, at the margins.) Again in contrast, for Canadians, democracy in part means resistance to hegemonic incursions from outside the country so of course Canadian scholarship, even in the mainstream, is more critical.

Second, Canada's location at the edge of the United States encourages not merely critical, but dialectical thought. Canadians are normally immersed in American media, and so are quite aware of American perspectives, even while knowing that these perspectives do not necessarily represent accurately the Canadian situation. Canadians, or at least Canadian scholars, will therefore be more likely to have a "double vision" (to quote Frye), meaning that they will tend to be dialectical thinkers. Whereas purportedly "radical" American theorists like Lawrence Grossberg and Mark Poster actually recommend abandoning dialectical modes of thought (Babe,

2009: 45, 63, 184, 190), in Canada even someone as mildly radical as Northrop Frye is deeply imbued with dialectical modes of analysis (Babe, 2000).

Most fundamentally, and as Harold Innis well understood, scholarship, like other modes of knowing, is subject to political-economic pressures and constraints. Differences in positions occupied by Canada and the USA in North America and in the world mean that media scholarship characterizing the two countries differs remarkably, too.

Notes

1   The three communication/media books were: *Empire and Communications* (1950), *The Bias of Communication* (1951), and *Changing Concepts of Time,* published posthumously (1952). Note should be made also of *Political Economy in the Modern State* (1946), as this was his transitional book. On the one hand, it contained reprints of articles in economics dating from the 1930s; on the other, it also contained as chapters "The Newspaper in Economic Development" and "An Economic Approach to English Literature in the Nineteenth Century," and also a Preface which, according to Paul Heyer, "is one of the most telling and compelling statements in his entire oeuvre; it serves to highlight the direction his future work will take and establishes the critical stance it will employ" (Heyer, 2003: 340).

2   This he did contemporaneously with but independently of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School. See, Babe (2009).

3   James Carey, for example, declared in an early article that "Innis and McLuhan, alone among students of human history, make the history of mass media central to the history of civilization at large… For them the history of the mass media … is another way of writing the history of Western civilization" (Carey 1968, 270–71).

4   Edmund Carpenter, McLuhan's friend, colleague and co-editor, questions the sincerity of McLuhan's attestations of being a disciple of Harold Innis (Carpenter, 1992: 11–12).

5   Such is the charge often levelled at Innis by anti-political economy researchers, for example Everett Rogers (Rogers, 1994: 484–89).

6   Hence the reason for McLuhan stating that his book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy,* is but a footnote to the observations of Innis.

7   This section is derived from Babe (2009) and Babe (2004).

8   Interestingly, Innis made much the same point noting that, "An advance in the state of industrialism reflected in the speed of the newspaper press and the radio meant a decline in the importance of biological time determined by agriculture" (Innis, 1971: 74).

9   In his staples writings Innis also observed that the demand for fur hats was out of synch with the breeding cycle of beavers, and that "the length of time required for [these animals] to arrive at maturity was an important factor in the destruction of the supply of fur" (Innis, 1967: 5).

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