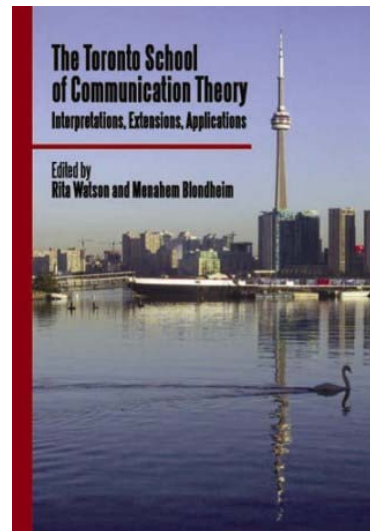


Rita Watson & Menahem Blondheim (Eds.), **The Toronto School of Communication Theory: Interpretations, Extensions, Applications**, Toronto/Jerusalem: University of Toronto Press/The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2007, 366 pp., \$32.95 (paperback).

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This book focuses on Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan as scholars at the geographical centre of the Toronto School of communication theory. It thus joins a substantial list of Canadian works that have examined and assessed the contributions and legacies of these two foundational thinkers in the field of communication (Kroker, 1984; Stamps, 1995; Willmott, 1996; Acland & Buxton, 1999; Babe, 2000; Theall, 2001; Cavell, 2002; Heyer, 2003; Marchessault, 2005; Genosko, 2005). This volume is the product of a transnational network of 17 authors, two editors and two university presses. It emerged out of the Toronto School sessions at the 9th Biennial Jerusalem Conference of the Israeli Association for Canadian Studies, held at Hebrew University in 2002. It contains a Forward by Elihu Katz, an afterword by David Olson, and 13 chapters organized into three parts: Interpretations, Extensions and Applications. The contributors are mainly from Canada, Israel and the U.S. Four of the five chapters in Part I were based on previous articles or are reprinted from the *Canadian Journal of Communication*. For readers who may still be unfamiliar with the academic lives of these two towering figures, the editors have provided brief biographies.



Putting the image of the 'Toronto School' into circulation once again advances the notion that such a school exists alongside the Birmingham, Chicago, Columbia, and Frankfurt Schools. We are called to acknowledge once again that we are inheritors of Innis's and McLuhan's views of communication. To be sure, during their academic careers, their discoveries failed to change the way many social science-based scholars thought and their claims and conjectures have been a continuing source of contentious debate. These two thinkers dared to put media at the centre of their analyses of social organization, the cultural environment and collective consciousness. Their explanatory power was put into question and they were both were charged with being technological determinists (Marvin, 1983; Williams, 1975). Behind the charge of media determinism against Innis were three notions. First, there was the notion that media only exist as communications except as socially invented practices. Second, culture was defined as a web of meanings within which technological objects are embedded. If social practice determines the meaning of technological objects, an analysis of actual history would reveal that religion, politics, economics and geography may make a real difference, but not technology and its development.

The social and cultural history of communication is still a good testing ground for media theory. Yet Innis realized not only that his colleagues in economics needed economic history, but that historical knowledge depends on the media used by each civilization (Innis, 1951, pp. 33, 63). McLuhan, perhaps the first media philosopher, saw media as extensions of the body and technologies as epistemic things. He appreciated Innis's mosaic method because he avoided matching causes to effects in favor of an "epistemology of experience" (McLuhan in Innis, 1972, p. x). Today, it is self-evident that mediation matters and can be as much of a crucial problem to study as the problem of meaning. As Geert Lovink recently commented, "knowledge itself is being produced in networks and databases" (Lovink, 2008). There is nothing more precious to communication scholars than our hardware, software and network connections. In fact, Régis Debray turned James Carey's ritual view of communication on its head by arguing that cultural meanings must be materially transmitted across time and space, which necessitates a work of transmission that is not purely technological (Debray, 2000). Of course, media determinism still abounds in popular accounts of new technologies and their cultural effect. But thanks to Innis and McLuhan's academic border crossing work, we have new keys for unlocking mediatized cultures as environments. Standing on the shoulders of these Canadian giants, we can see farther and can better handle the material, mutable, intrinsic properties of media, mix the semiotic, sociological, and philosophical, and dig into historical circumstances without succumbing to the myth of autonomous technology, exalting the latest technological boom as a "revolution," or becoming reductionist (Potts, 2008).

In their introduction, Rita Watson and Menahem Blondheim acknowledge that the Toronto School is an "invisible theoretical construct" and "imagined network of intellectuals and their ideas" (p. 22). They propose that when Innis and McLuhan formed the core of this network, they had three themes in common. The first is an emphasis on communication as process rather than structure. The second is a focus on effects, or the consequences of communication. And the third is the technology, or medium, of communication. It is their concurrence on these three themes that enables the editors to try to make the case that we can talk about Innis and McLuhan as forming a "school of thought." McLuhan also found Innis's work to be suggestive of a new school of "communication theory and practice," but the University of Toronto failed to institutionalize this idea for a school as part of its own academic planning and growth in the arts and sciences. We should also remember that McLuhan arrived at the University of Toronto in 1946 so they worked at the same university for only six years, had only sporadic contact, and did not collaborate on any communication research. Their ideas may be compatible in retrospect, but the editors suggest it was the diversity of their interests that explains their staying power and appeal. Indeed, it is far more illuminating to see these two, north of U.S. empire thinkers within their own frame of reference in order to fully appreciate how they each jolted scholarly thinking about what the problem of communication is understood to be. Deeper understandings of their particular projects and concerns are provided by many of the chapters in the rest of the book.

The first section begins with two interpretations of Innis. Both Diebert and Blondheim stake out an approach that bridges the early and late Innis, his work in economic history and his later work on the history of communication, to redeem him from the onus of being a technological determinist. Ronald Diebert's chapter presents Innis against the background of globalization, U.S. empire and world order transformation. Comparing essentialist with historicist approaches to history, he finds evidence that Innis

tended towards the latter mode of historical thought. Diebert characterizes Innis as providing a "sophisticated materialist alternative" to structural realism and Marxism. His "ecological holism" incorporates "natural, technological and ideational factors in the constitution of civilizations or societies" (p. 41). While having some affinities with social constructivism, Innis makes room for a nature that is not socially constructed. For Diebert, Innis's approach to media and culture is multi-attentional and non-reductionist. He updates Innis's view of the spatial bias of modern Western civilization by suggesting that today's hypermedia environment has given rise to a temporal bias, and this bias, in turn, has transformed power, security and authority in world politics. This is a major theoretical-political point, but it was originally developed by Jody Berland in her seminal essay on Innis's analysis of centre-margin relations (Berland, 1997).

Even though Innis made contradictory statements about oral communication, and offered determinist sounding pronouncements like "The use of a medium of communication over a long period will to some extent determine the character of knowledge to be communicated. . . ." (Innis in Watson & Blondheim, 2007, p. 64), Blondheim shows that Innis's account of media dynamics displays an "inverted determinism dialectic" (p. 61). From the perspective of a given socio-political or socio-cultural system, the development and dominance of time-binding or space-binding media will "generate a counter bias as a corrective, in the cause of equilibrium" (p. 61). In contrast to Diebert, Blondheim views Innis as a "social constructivist, holding that technological change is engineered and affected by society's strategies and choices" (p. 64). Following A.L. Kroeber, Blondheim argues that Innis constructed "communication" as a new subject in the study of history and culture. When one considers the Hegelian influences on Innis, his elliptical narrative, internal contradictions and conflicting interpretations may be regarded as reflecting the method of philosophical history. Blondheim also makes the important point that for Innis, "communication" in North American history would be what the "Frontier" was for Frederick Jackson Turner's American history. But Innis expanded his communication bias beyond the transatlantic region to show that Western communication history, from early ancient empires to the emergent U.S. one, is not Whig history. By the time Innis gets to thinking about the newspaper industry between the American Revolution and the mid-20th century, he was also quite pessimistic about media, modernity and public life (Buxton, 1998).

The next two chapters look back at McLuhan's legacy from the perspective of scholars who first encountered his work in the 1960s. The late James Carey, and Ruth and Elihu Katz, agree that McLuhan's work represented a "genuine and multifaceted intellectual advance" (Carey, p. 89) that "acknowledged or not . . . stimulated, maybe revolutionized, our thinking about the social history and sociology of mass communication" (Katz & Katz, p. 99). These chapters pay tribute to a Canadian scholar who was much maligned within 20th century U.S. social-scientific research mainstream for proposing that we understand media, including the new medium of television, through the senses, language, literature and art rather than through media content. Carey's contribution reviews the constellation of politics, ideology and intellect that led him to react negatively to what would become one of the canonic works of media studies — *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) — which he saw as a first draft in mimeographed manuscript form in 1960. Carey's contribution goes beyond recycling McLuhan's literary background and heuristic concepts to identify his methodological advance — a "hermeneutic of technology and social life" (p. 93). It was McLuhan's realization that changes in technology redefined aesthetic experience, including

the experience of time and space. What modern technology created was not new effects, but new patterns — combinations and juxtapositions — of experience. Thus, the significance of printing was not that it was space-biased medium as Innis maintained, or both space and time biased as subsequent historians of the printing press discovered, but that printing altered “what we took to be an aesthetically satisfying pattern of spatial arrangement, whether this was an arrangement of a page, a city, a house or a theory” (p. 95). In this remarkable rereading, McLuhan’s questionable ideological hinges are all still there. “Nonetheless,” Carey concedes, “machines, once constructed, do operate over long periods of time entirely on the basis of their own internal realities” (p. 96). It is on the basis of McLuhan’s decisive contribution that a younger generation of scholars went on to compare McLuhan’s larger corpus to major French theorists (Genosko, 1999; Hanke, 2005).

A second section in the collection consists of three extensions of problems that concerned Innis as well as one extension of McLuhan’s arguments about the cognitive consequences of media. Frosh’s chapter returns to the problem of space and the concept of bias. Innis is best known for connecting light and heavy media to the dissemination of knowledge over space or time. Innis has been taken to task for his claims that the dominance of time-biased or space-biased media foster or give rise to decentralization or centralization, religious hierarchies vs. secular administrative elites, provinciality or imperialism, etc. Frosh shows that the bias of technology is not just a concept for media theory, it is a “political problem: The bias of a dominant communication technology has to be balanced somehow, by alternative media technologies or by other non-technological means, if a civilization is to protect itself from either the threat of spatial disintegration or of temporal exhaustion” (p. 151). Frosh’s first major insight is that, instead of any single dominant medium and overarching bias of culture, there are (borrowing Raymond William’s terms) “residual” and “emergent” time-binding and space-binding media co-present in a social system and this produces “historically-specific tensions and struggles” (p. 151). His second insight is that Innis’s distinction between time and space, oral and written, is “not simply a dichotomy . . . but an ontological valorization of time and speech and their relation to thought, and a consequent denigration of space and writing” (p. 161). Innis’s bias in favor of oral tradition is well known, what is less acknowledged is all communication media, except oral speech, appear to Innis as “objectifying spatial materializations of what had previously only occurred in time” (p. 162). Frosh argues that this puts Innis in line with Plato’s suspicion of writing, Lessing’s reservations about painting, and Marx’s conceptions of alienation and reification. The more complex point Frosh leads us to is that to think alongside Innis is to think “*pictorially* and *visually*” (p. 165).

Allen’s chapter tries to produce an Innisian account of the telegraph and the telegraphic news agency by bringing together some of Innis’s tools and the early history of the Canadian Press news agency. While Innis provides useful tools, Allen notes for Innis the telegraph was only one several media of communication that contributed to the newspaper industry. As to the question of whether a technology is either centralizing or decentralizing, Allen’s answer is neither. Despite Innis’s emphasis on the telegraph’s decentralizing tendency, his discussions “point toward an underlying tension: they broke down monopolies in some respects, but strengthened them in other ways” (p. 188). To think alongside Innis and use his legacy, Allen suggests we take three steps: First, we have to abandon single medium analysis. Second, we have to account for the new institutions and their way of conceiving the world alongside the development of technological networks. Third, it would be problematic to write an historical account that

only told the story of centralization or decentralization. "It is more enlightening," Allen concludes, "to consider telegraphic news in relation to a shifting balance between centralization and decentralization, a balance which changes over time and may display elements of both tendencies at the same time" (p. 198). This echoes, without any acknowledgment, Jody Berland's description of Innis's research on the formation of monopolies and the "simultaneous emergence of territorial dependencies whose effects is to centralize and decentralize such knowledge and information (Berland, 1997, p. 65).

The last extension takes Innis's thought into the Internet age. Time and space were key categories for Innis, and his very last book was titled *Changing Concepts of Time*. Xiaoquan Zhao wonders what Innis would have said about cyberspace and Internet time. As a new metamedium, is the Internet time or space-biased? Zhao argues that Innis would not have had to plea for time as hard as he did when he made his famous 'Plea for Time' in 1950. "The Internet," he writes, "unlike the traditional print and electronic media, may be able to diminish society's bias toward space" (p. 200). Zhao first makes the case that Innis is still relevant to those seeking to interpret the rapid and radical changes in the communication environment, and second, that Innis's dialectical approach entails dynamic interactions at three levels of biases: medium bias, media bias, and cultural bias. At each level, Zhao sees a prevailing bias toward time. In this substantivist account of the Internet's essence, Innis's pessimism about the spatial bias of Western civilization is transformed into a "realistic opportunity for the resurrection of time" (p. 212). Besides downsizing and de-dialecticalizing Innis's macro level approach to the rise and fall of empires, there are at least three problems with his conclusion. First, the external U.S. political economy of the Internet weighs more heavily on the development of the Internet than Zhao allows. Second, as most weblogs indicate, not everyone who makes a contribution to the Internet is contributing to the growth of knowledge online. Third, the Internet has great reach but lacks durability because electronic signals are highly perishable and archived data face extraordinary obsolescence rates (Frost, 2003). This lack of durability does not bode well for either collective memory or the future work of historians.

Rita Watson evaluates McLuhan's contribution to literacy studies, in general, and the alphabet effect, in particular. Availing herself of theoretical and empirical results that were unavailable to McLuhan, she discusses how his theory of the cognitive consequences of phonetic-alphabetic literacy may have been under the influence of his own literate bias, an orthography-specific view that marginalized other writing systems, and of a standard model of communication. Against the standard model, Watson offers a cognitive pragmatic model to bring coherence to inconclusive and contradictory results of earlier work on the oral-literate transition. In her evaluation, some of the postulates of the Toronto School still stand while other claims are not supported. "The disadvantage," she concludes, "of the standard model . . . is simply that it is restricted to code-based hypotheses. The advantage of the cognitive-pragmatic model is that any source of information, and diverse ways in which those sources of information figure in the interpretation process, can be brought to bear in a coherent manner when trying to identify the consequences of change in communication media" (p. 227). Her framework for understanding cognitive bias suggests McLuhan is more defensible if we construe cognitive bias more generally rather than in his perceptual-cognitive terms of ear (oral) or eye-oriented (literate) cultures. She also believes McLuhan's mind was in keeping with the tradition of technology/mind theorizing and social constructivist thought. The new media, she adds, "demand simultaneous processing of multi-modal representations in diverse spatio-temporal configurations, with varying degrees of fixity and temporality" (p. 231). Given this dynamic complexity,

Watson suggests that questions about the consequences of new media can be formulated by "focusing on the shifting role different codes and representational media play in the interpretive process" (p. 231). This means, contra McLuhan, that cognitive effects are not independent of the cognitive environment in which interpreters or users attribute meaning to media content. In Watson's view of the relation between media and mind, mind matters more than sounds, letters, or screens. For her, meaning is not in pictographs, pixels, phonemes, or letters. This cognitive-pragmatic perspective is valuable because it helps dispel some of the effects McLuhan and others attributed to the invention of the Greek alphabet. But it still presumes that the individual mind is exterior to technology. By emphasizing cognition in general, we may lose sight of McLuhan's unique articulation of media and our visual/auditory faculties and spaces. McLuhan's view of language as a technology — a coding device and storage system for collective experience — resonates with contemporary techno-evolutionary views that language and the growth of technology materialize the mind and virtualize action (Levy, 1998).

The last section provides applications of the insights of the Toronto School to contemporary dilemmas. Nossek and Adoni contrast McLuhan's technological theory with neofunctionalist theory to examine media, national consciousness, media reception and identity in the Israeli context. Drawing upon Innis and McLuhan, Cohen-Avigdor and Lehman-Wilzig, in keeping with the upsurge of scholarship on the influence of communication technology, present a taxonomy of the elements and variables of the Internet and the WWW with a view to the possibilities these offer for producers and users of online journalism. Cohen-Almagor takes McLuhan's remarks on publication, the transfer of our being to data banks, and the loss of personal privacy as a starting point for examining ethical and legal considerations of the right to privacy. She focuses on the case of Princess Diana in the British media and the Supreme Court of Canada case of *Les Éditions Vice-Versa Inc. vs. Aubry*. Finally, Shifman & Blondheim take another crack at absolving Innis of the charge of technological determinism. In addition to re-interpreting Innis as a social constructivist, they try to extend Innis's historical analysis in two ways. First, they break his single time-space axis into six dimensions — morphology, scalability, synchronicity, directionality, nodality, and mode — plus a meta and subdimension connectivity and throughput. Their historical review of media technologies along these dimensions suggests Innis's core propositions stand up well against the progressive theory of communication. Innis swam against the mainstream of high technological society by not reading new communication technologies as a march toward progress.

In his Afterword, David Olson says that Innis and McLuhan's theories were too ambitious. Perhaps so. I prefer to think that they took a detour through history to enlarge our image of what media theory could be. Watson and Blondheim and their various contributors show that even if their concerns are not our concerns, they had some very important things to say about media technology, political and cultural change, and modernity. Even though the entire context of communication has changed since they each exited from the field of communication studies they helped to define, readers of this book will be able to see farther into our contemporary media sphere if they stand on the shoulders of these giants.

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