THE CANADIAN SCHOOL

By Norm Friesen & Darryl Cressman (February 2012)

The Canadian School refers to a loose, interdisciplinary group of scholars who made foundational contributions to a general theory of media, but who form a school only in an unconventional and retrospective sense. In some cases, these scholars were brought into association during the 1950's at the University of Toronto, generally in the context of weekly seminars (The Culture and Communications Seminar) and of the publication of an annual journal (*Explorations,* 1953-1959). In this context, scholars such as Tom Easterbrook (economics), Jacqueline Tyrwhitt (architecture/planning), and Carl Williams (psychology) joined McLuhan and Carpenter in an interdisciplinary inquiry into media technologies as anthropological and cultural phenomena, articulating this study through distinctions including those between orality and literacy, visual and acoustic space, and Harold Innis' notion of the binding of media to space versus time. The range of individuals (and their disciplines) commonly associated with the Canadian School is much broader, and includes Harold Innis (political economy), Eric Havelock (classics), Walter Ong (literature), and Derrick de Kerckhove (literature/art) in addition to McLuhan and Carpenter.

To speak of a general *Canadian* school of *media theory* is to use a specifically German label, one that can be traced to Kittler's *Optical Media: Berlin Lectures 1999*, where he inaccurately attributes the term to Arthur Kroker's *Technology and the Canadian Mind: Innis/McLuhan/Grant*. The group of scholars whose paths intersected with McLuhan's are more frequently known in English as the "Toronto School of Communication," a phrase which first appeared in a 1968 paper by Goody and Watt. A Canadian school of media theory and Toronto school of communication both refer to the same general intellectual output, but differences in each names and frames this output is significant. To speak of the "Toronto school" is to see this work as a *local* approach to *communication,* suggesting that it was a faction within the larger, contemporaneous and mainly empirical study of communication. To speak of a "Canadian school" suggests something much more substantial, namely the founding, as Dieter Mersch describes, of a "general theory of media" or of the original introduction of "the term 'media' as it is used in cultural theory today."

What is known in German as "the Canadian School," finally, is only one aspect of Communication Studies in Canada. Unlike Departments of Communication Studies in the United States which are oriented to empirical research or the training of journalists and communications professionals, in Canada, Communication Studies is an inclusive blend of critical traditions used to study media and culture, including: Marxism, Frankfurt School Critical Theory, Feminism, French Post-Structuralism, Phenomenology, Birmingham School Cultural Studies, and Sociology. With this critical emphasis, Departments of Communication in Canada attract students interested in activism and social justice, with studies of media in the tradition of Innis and McLuhan being marginalized.

Harold Innis' (1894-1952) work would represent the starting point of a Canadian School or a general theory of media. Innis obtained his PhD in political economy at the University of Chicago in 1920 and in that same year accepted an appointment in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto where he remained until his death. Intellectually, his career consists of two phases. The first, lasting from 1923 to the early 1940s, was concerned with Canadian economic history and the development of a 'staples' thesis. This thesis was formulated in *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1930) and *The Cod Fisheries* (1940). In these books, Innis examines the economic history of Canada as a history of resource (staple) extraction and export. The third phase of Innis's career concerns the study of communication and media and is associated with the book *Empire & Communications* (1950) and the essays collected in *The Bias of Communication* (1951). With the luxury of hindsight it is possible to read

the first two phases of Innis's career as containing the seeds of his study of communication and media. For example, both Babe (2000) and Kroker (1984) point out that Innis interprets the Canadian Pacific Railroad as a medium for spreading European civilization across North America. Similarly, as Babe (2000) writes, Innis's staples thesis is premised on the idea that, "the production or extraction of natural resources creates environments, or ecosystems that *mediate* human relations and otherwise affect a people's thoughts and actions" (p.59). Innis's emphasis on the staple itself (fish, fur, timber, wheat) led him to realize that each staple represented a distinct form of mediation that linked together systems of transportation, social structure, business, politics, culture, and technology. The rise of a new staple meant a systematic reconfiguration of existing social, cultural, political, and economic formations (*ibid*., pp.64-65).

In *Empire and Communications*, Innis's interest in what could be called the materiality of Canada's economic history was re-configured into a study of the materiality of communication. Innis argued that the history of civilizations could be studied as a history of media. In other words, the characteristics of the great empires that dominate Western history—Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, Europe, and North America—are the characteristics of particular media. From this perspective, Innis identifies the fall of great empires as the shift from one medium of communication to another: the fall of the Egyptian empire was precipitated by the shift from stone to papyrus; the greatness of ancient Greek culture is rooted in its oral tradition, and its decline parallels the development of the alphabet and the shift from orality to literary; and, finally, the fall of the Roman empire is the decline of papyrus and the introduction of parchment and paper. In this way, Innis firmly establishes the technique, common to all members of the Canadian School, of drawing analogues or homologies between the materiality of a given medium and patterns in the corresponding society and culture. Each medium of communication, Innis writes, creates "monopolies of knowledge" whose dominance depends on how a particular medium organizes ideas and information. As McLuhan writes in his introduction to *The Bias of Communication*, "Once Innis has ascertained the dominant technology of a culture he could be sure that this was the cause and the shaping force of the entire structure. He could also be sure that this dominant form and all its causal powers were necessarily masked from the attention of that culture by a psychic mechanism of "protective inhibition" as it were" (p.xii).

For Innis, communication "occupies a crucial position in the organization and administration of government and in turn of empires and of Western civilization" (1950, p.5). Thus, the media through which communication is organized and disseminated contributes to the nature of civilization. From this, Innis articulated the significance of media for culture through the concepts of *time* and *space*. Angus (1993) argues the key subject matter of Innis's communication theory is the continuity of a culture in the two dimensions of time (persistence over time) and space (extension over land and sea) (p.26). Every medium of communication is biased towards one of these dimensions: "Media that emphasize time are those that are durable in character, such as parchment, clay, and stone…media that emphasize space are apt to be less durable and light in character, such as papyrus and paper (Innis 1950, p.7). The significance of this distinction is not merely one of efficiency or durability, it concerns the nature of the social world (Angus 1993, 1998). Depending on the dominant media of communication, societies are either time-bound or space-bound. Time-bound societies, in the purest form, are oral cultures: they emphasize continuity, collectivity, and practical knowledge. Alternatively, space-bound societies, those dominated by paper or electronic images, "accord high value to abstract knowledge and to exercising control over space, but place relatively little value on, even denigrate, tradition or continuity with the past" (Babe 2000, p.73).

The insights that Innis took from his mediatic historiography were developed further in the essays that make up *The Bias of Communication*. In the essay *Minerva's Owl*, Innis examines how different media have influenced the character of knowledge for the past 4000 years and how monopolies of knowledge form around these media until they are pushed aside by the introduction of new media. In the essay *The Bias of Communication*, Innis returns to the relationship between time and space biased media: "A medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time and it becomes necessary to study its characteristics in order to appraise its influence in its cultural setting…The relative influence on time or space will imply a bias of significance to the culture in which it is embedded" (p.33).

The concluding essays in *The Bias of Communication* develop Innis's critique of modernity, which has as its basis a mediatic bias that Innis makes explicit: "My bias is with the oral tradition, particularly as reflected in Greek civilization" (p.190). From this perspective, Innis's view of modernity is tragic: "the conditions of freedom of thought are in danger of being destroyed by science, technology, and the mechanization of knowledge, and with them, Western civilization" (*ibid*.). In *A Plea for Time*, Innis expresses his critique in more detail. His idealization of ancient Greece is explained as an ideal balance of oral and literate traditions, "the power of the oral tradition in Greece which checked the bias of the written medium supported a brief period of cultural activity such as has never been equaled" (p.64). Alternatively, the media of the twentieth century are overwhelmingly space biased, resulting in a type of present mindedness that is superficial and detrimental to the development of culture. The solution to the crisis of modernity requires balancing the space bias of dominant media with media that are biased towards time. Only then can we recover what has been lost in the rush to embrace the progress of mass culture.

As Angus (1993) reminds us, Innis' perspective is shaped by his experiences in the trenches of World War I: "He is a member of that generation of people who came to maturity in, and immediately after, the First World War – a generation to whom we owe so much for the development of critical thought" (p.22). The events of the Second World War parallel Innis's work on communication and appear to have cemented his critical outlook. Accordingly, Angus locates Innis's critique of modernity in line with those of Husserl, Heidegger, and the members of the Frankfurt School.

The significance of Innis's contributions to the Canadian School cannot be underestimated. As McLuhan wrote, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) "is a footnote of explanation" to Innis's insights (p.50). Innis was the first to interpret history as the story of successive media technologies, and through this historiography Innis introduced the notion of a "comparative media theory" that assisted researchers in attempting to view their own media "from outside" to identify their own prejudices as the prejudices of the media through which they come to know their world (Angus 1998).

Eric Havelock (1903-1988) left the University of Toronto for Harvard in 1947, a year after McLuhan's arrival, and his work was discovered by Innis only after his departure. Havelock, like Innis, thus plays an important role in of the pre-history of a Canadian School. Working from studies of Homer and performances of oral epic poetry in Yugoslavia recorded by Milman Parry and Albert Lord, Havelock developed the fundamental distinction between orality and literacy. This is a distinction that underlies McLuhan's thought, and that becomes explicit again in the work of Walter Ong. Havelock built on Lord and Parry's discovery of patterns of "oral-formulaic composition" in the epics attributed to Homer and contemporary Yugoslavian performances. He sought to elaborate upon the "Parry-Lord thesis," which asserted that the Homeric epics were the textual record of what were earlier oral performances. Poetic narrative and its performance are indispensible in non-literate societies, because without writing, they

provide the principle means by which the culture is encoded, preserved, and transmitted: "The only possible verbal technology available to guarantee the preservation and fixity of transmission was that of the rhythmic word organized cunningly in verbal and metrical patterns" to aid memory and performance. This "tribal encyclopedia" not only encoded all aspects of the society not transmitted through its artefacts and surroundings, its forms and patterns also defined their formal language. In a move common to the Canadian School, this linguistic "mnemonic apparatus" –along with later technologies of writing-- are seen as broadly homologous with thought and larger cultural patterns and values:

> Control over the style of a people's speech, however indirect, means control also over their thought. The two technologies of preserved communication known to man, namely the poetised style with its acoustic apparatus and the visual prosaic style with its visual and material apparatus, each within their respective domains control also the content of what is communicable… This amounts to saying that the patterns of [human] thought have historically run in two distinct grooves, the oral and the written.

The oral epic and its performance constructs a self in accordance with the epic adventure, resulting in one that splits "itself into an endless series of moods… identifying itself successively with a whole series of polymorphic vivid situations." The self of oral cultures, in other words, is lacking an "inner self-consistency" a sense of self as "a consciousness which is self-governing… reflective, thoughtful [and] critical" (200). These and other characteristics were developed further by Havelock in *The Muse Learns to Write*; however, it is in Ong's *Orality and Literacy* that the characteristics of orality and literacy receive their most influential treatment.

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) is the most famous member of the Canadian School, and his leadership in the Explorations group, and later in the Centre for Culture and Technology brought many of the other members of the school together physically and intellectually. Before coming to the University of Toronto, McLuhan studied in Canada (University of Manitoba) and the UK (Cambridge), and taught in the US (St. Louis and Madison, Wisconsin, where he converted to Catholicism). McLuhan is best known through his aphorisms, which reveal much about the structure and dynamic of his thought, and which at times offer a clarity that is lacking from his texts.

The medium is the message, McLuhan's most popular aphorism, has been said to have "laid bare the terrain of *Medienwissenschaften* (media studies)." It accomplishes this by underscoring the broad and deep cultural and philosophical significance of media. In doing so, the aphorism focuses attention on something that by its very definition escapes notice, and that was previously neglected in philosophy and other *Humanwissenschaften* (humanities or studies of culture). "[F]or 2500 years," McLuhan writes, "the philosophers of the Western world have excluded... *techne* from [their] meditations" (letters, p. 429). Along with Heidegger and Innis, McLuhan was one of the first to explore how media and technologies bring with them a meaning or message of profound human and cultural significance. This message is manifold and complex, but it is articulated in the physical and cultural re-patterning of society and above all, of consciousness or awareness.

The medium is the message, according to McLuhan scholar Richard Cavell, "announc[es] the end of hermeneutics, and it is this death knell to traditional critical models within humanistic inquiry that can serve as the agonistic point of origin for the institutional study of media." The hermeneutic, humanistic inquiry of which Cavell speaks would insist, perhaps tautologically, that *the message* is the message, or that the message is at least a mediation of the author's awareness or intent –one that can be recovered or "understood" through a "fusing of horizons" of space and time. For McLuhan, it is not understanding

or recovery that occurs via a medium, but the performance or production of a wide range of cultural and other consequences. As a result, a causal, operational language of effects to be "inventoried" and bodily and perceptual extensions to be "innered" or "outered" replaces the hermeneutic language of understanding, comprehension and even communication.

In opposing one term (medium) unconventionally with another (message), "the medium is the message" also reveals the oppositional, dualistic structure and "method" central to McLuhan's thought: The relationship between two terms –one being dominant over the other-- is suddenly inversed, and this inversion results in a larger reconfiguration of terms, forms and types of awareness. This generally happens through the "acceleration" or "amplification" of the already dominant term to an extreme point. Referencing Gestalt theory of sensory perception, McLuhan described this relationship in terms of "figure and ground," an opposition that underlies and structures other binaries in his work, including those of "cliché and archetype," "eye and ear," "hot and cool," "acoustic and visual space," and "extension and (auto)amputation." Simultaneous perception of figure and ground together is required for a "comprehensive awareness" of the larger situation, and of the dynamic "resonant" interplay between the two opposed terms –which as McLuhan repeatedly stressed, was "where the action is." McLuhan's many oppositions represent an attempt to achieve this effect or awareness in his readers, and this dynamic of opposition, reversal and simultaneous perception was elaborated by his son Eric into an elaborate, quasi-naturalistic methodology in *The Laws of Media: The new Science*, published posthumously, and based on McLuhan's notes. Although sometimes referred to as a dialectic, this dynamic is profoundly non-dialectical when compared in any detail with the *geistige* and material dialectics of Hegel and Marx, or the negative dialectics of the Frankfurt School. Instead of the sublation (*Aufhebung*) of two opposed cultural, historical, material terms into synthetic third, McLuhan focuses on the dynamic of a binary opposition, situating it not culturally or materially, but in an technologically-determined sensory context: "The resonant gap in nature, reverberating with greater intensity, bypassed the Hegelian process of interconnectedness, restoring the structure of acoustic space to Western experience."

The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man (1962) is the title of McLuhan's second and most conventionally academic book, and the phrase "Gutenberg galaxy" itself refers to the constellation of sensory and cultural characteristics of the age of print. This age stretches from Gutenberg in the mid-fifteenth century to the appearance of electronic media such as Marconi's radio near the end of the nineteenth, and it is the era and culture most strongly associated with "literacy" and the suppression of "orality." McLuhan worked to show how contrasting mediatic forms can be "extended to the forms of thought and the organization of experience in society and politics;" concluding that, for example, "the Newtonian laws of mechanics, latent in Gutenberg typography, were translated by Adam Smith to govern the laws of production and consumption." McLuhan saw literacy's tendency to produce an autonomous self, noted earlier by Havelock, as being greatly amplified through print. The result is the "typographic man," the autonomous, rational individual, a citizen with a proprietary personal identity, private thoughts, specialized knowledge and individuated point of view. All of this contrasts with the characteristics of the emerging "Marconi Galaxy," which is marked by organically unified tribal collectivity, simultaneity, and plurality.

Acoustic versus visual space represents an opposition that, while perhaps not as familiar as "extension and amputation" or "hot and cool," is indispensible to McLuhan's thought and his collaboration with other members of the Toronto School, particularly Edmund Carpenter. It implies a very different conceptualization of space (and also of time) than is offered in Innis's notion of time- and space-bound media, but one that is entirely consistent with McLuhan's work from the 1950's through to his final

publications. "After Gutenberg the … idea of space and time will change to regard them as containers to be filled with objects or activities, [manifest in] continuous, lineal, and uniform sequences." This is visual space, which is delineated according to the distanced, analytic and perspective orientation of the eye. Acoustic space, as McLuhan and Carpenter explain, is "has no point of favored focus. It's a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing. It is not pictorial space, boxed in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating, its own dimensions moment by moment." These two types of space not only align with and ramify other bifurcations in McLuhan's thought, but can be seen as *the* central opposition in McLuhan, "remain[ing] for him both metaphor and materiality, a fundamentally dynamic site of dialogue, translation and exchange" (Cavell, 2002, p. 27).

Extensions of Man refers to McLuhan's thesis that "all media are extensions of some human faculty-psychic or physical... the wheel is an extension of the foot, the book is an extension of the eye… electric circuitry, an extension of the central nervous system...." The idea that media and technology are, effectively, mental or physical "outerings" or prostheses highlights the performative and anthropological dimensions of McLuhan's thought, and extends his definition of media to include any and all technology, from the wheel to the circuit-board. Extension and (auto)amputation interrelate as any other of McLuhan's oppositions –in a dynamic of attenuation and amplification. "Such amplification" as occurs through a prosthesis, McLuhan explains, "is bearable by the nervous system only through numbness or blocking of perception" and it is this numbness or blocking that is captured in the terms "amputation" or "autoamputation." One important nuance in this particular opposition is that the one term does not flip into its opposite when pushed to the extreme. Instead, the intensity of extension and amputation increase or decrease together, in equal proportions, with McLuhan using the words virtually interchangeably. McLuhan's focus on the opposition of extension and amputation locates him in rich interrelationship with lines of thought reaching from Freud (who declared man "a kind of prosthetic god"), through to trends in philosophical anthropology and trans- and posthumanism. Philosophical anthropology sees the individual as a being that is incomplete on its own, and in need of cultural extension or completion to become fully human, whereas posthumanisms see "man" an entity which can transcend itself or be radically redefined through its prostheses. McLuhan's insistence that extension is simultaneous with amputation, however, underscores an ambivalence about technology that is not explicit in either anthropological or "post-anthropological" accounts of man and his extensions.

Traffic is adapted as a theme by McLuhan from Innis, and accommodated to his notion of (media) technology as extensions. However, in his treatment of these issues in both the *Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* McLuhan retains Innis' concern with the exercise of political power. Thus, McLuhan uses examples from history to show how "the roman road was a paper route in every sense," used to carry papyrus scrolls, manuscripts, and finally the much more rapidly-produced printed word to exercise Rome's political and later, religious control. Using more recent examples, McLuhan explains that "the matter or speed-up by wheel, road, and paper is the extension of power in an ever more homogeneous and uniform space." Over time, technologies of transport and inscription gradually accelerated and amplified this extension across broader and every more marginal visually-defined spaces. However this changes with the vastly greater speeds of electronic transmission: "[W]hen information itself is the main traffic," a "break boundary" is reached, and a new configuration takes hold." Electric speeds create centres everywhere," and "all earlier forms of acceleration such as road and rail" are superseded. "What emerges," at this juncture, McLuhan explains, "is a total field of inclusive awareness... the new world of the global village."

Like McLuhan's other slogans, the "global village" brings with it an oppositional structure, a tension between global and parochial, centre and margin, innering and outering. It brings together many other themes in his work, and carries strong utopian connotations, appearing at some points as a configuration of binary elements in which their opposition has been balanced or actually resolved. Building on his notion of electric circuitry extending the nervous system, McLuhan explains that "[e]lectricity makes possible ... an amplification of human consciousness on a world scale," and that such an electrified "global consciousness" will be realized in a "new society [as] one mythic integration, a resonating world akin to the old tribal echo chamber where magic will live again." The global village, in short, is realized as acoustic space rather than visual space, as an overcoming of the opposition between centre and margin. However, at the same time, it is neither figure nor ground, but the resonating interval that appears when both gestaltist elements are in active interplay.

Walter J. Ong (1912-2003) **and Derrick de Kerckhove** (1944-)

Both Walter J. Ong and Derrick de Kerckhove came to know McLuhan as students, but at very different times and places. Ong completed his Masters degree in St. Louis under McLuhan in 1941; de Kerckhove collaborated with McLuhan in Toronto in the 1970's, during McLuhan's final years. Both elaborated upon themes discussed above after McLuhan's death, into the 1980's and 1990's. Ong is principally known for *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), and de Kerckhove for *The Skin of Culture* (1995). Prior to *Orality and Literacy*, Ong undertook major studies of how the printing press changed education and the organization of knowledge. *Orality and LIteracy* provides an excellent introduction to some of the themes associated with the Canadian School, while at the same time insisting that there is "there is no 'school' of orality and literacy." Ong conventionalizes and clarifies McLuhan and Innis' compelling but sometimes vague characterizations, introducing for example the term "secondary orality" where McLuhan had invoked images such as a new "tribal echo chamber." Ong defines secondary orality as the contemporary return to oral forms and expression through "telephone, radio, television and [audio] tape...." It incorporates the outward emphasis, the "participatory mystique [and] a strong group sense" of orality, but because it is based on firmly established literate culture, Ong explains that these characteristics are more "deliberate and self-conscious" than those of "originally oral" cultures (ones not previously exposed to literacy): "We are turned outward because we we have [first been] turned inward" through literacy, as Ong puts it. Instead of the dynamic tensions of McLuhan's oppositions, or the obscurity of Innis' detail, Ong ends his book by very explicitly demarcating the oral and literate as follows:

> The highly interiorized stages of consciousness in which the individual is not so immersed unconsciously in communal structures are stages which, it appears, consciousness would never reach without writing. ...Writing introduces division and alienation, but a higher unity as well. It intensifies the sense of self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons.

While Ong's categorical emphasis might be appealing, claims like the ones above have proven problematic to substantiate in anthropological research. Also, it is important to recall that Innis' attention to detail and Mcluhan's oppositional dynamics may be more difficult because of their greater complexity. For example, the printed page, according to McLuhan, can sometimes be "orally empathic," rather than being necessarily visual and linear, making McLuhan's "theory of orality and literacy (and the spaces they produce)," as Cavell says "more nuanced than Ong's."

Derrick de Kerckhove, the Director of the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto from 1983 to 2008, has thus been in a position to draw connections between McLuhan's observations and more recent technological developments, such as virtual reality, cyberculture, and the Internet. Quoting McLuhan on cybernetics and the extensions of man, de Kerckhove for example claims that "Virtual reality was foreseen... [by McLuhan] some three decades before the idea was even considered. McLuhan [knew] that the purpose of computerization was to ...hand over the reins of physical power to thought." Such retrospective confirmation does little to adapt or advance McLuhan's thought. Rather than using the perspective afforded by recent technical developments to shed new light on McLuhan's thought, de Kerckhove sees these intervening occurrences as justification to echo the style and substance of McLuhan texts, doing little to prevent the influence of this work from being overtaken by other developments in Canadian studies of media. By the 1980's, if there was such a thing as a distinctly Canadian approach to media and communications, it was oriented towards either a Marxist political economy or cultural studies, both sharing an emphasis on media content. Without a concrete empirical foundation to rest upon, and few able to creatively extend his insights, the media theory developed by McLuhan and those associated with him could not be readily operationalized by the social scientists who populated Canadian Communication Studies departments. Even today, there are few scholars working in Canadian Communication Studies who identify themselves with media theory in this sense; it seems that if elements of Canadian School of media theory exist at all, they are to be found on the periphery of the disciplinary mainstream in Canada.

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