

by Patrick Crawley

*"Civilizations survive only through a concern with their limitations, and in turn with the limitations of their institutions, including empires"*

— Harold A. Innis

*"The bias of technology can only be controlled by politics, by curtailing the expansionist tendencies of technological societies and by creating avenues of democratic discussion and participation beyond the control of modern technology"*

— James W. Carey & John J. Quirk

Innis' strategy for Canadian culture

Perhaps the most novel element of the 20th century has been the technological explosion in communications, the implications of which are profoundly far-reaching. Indeed, the very future of Canada's information sector will be decided in the next few months as the Broadcasting Task Force Report and a Green Paper on broadcasting policy propose *new political expressions* for our capacity to communicate into the 21st century.

In Canada, film, radio and television are information technologies. The organizational elements of Canada's information sector, centred around the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, are the corporate expressions of these technologies. The impact of new technology on organizations based on older technology reaches deep into their cores, alters their patterns of work, and changes the culture surrounding them. Today the engine of change forcing the information sector into new shapes is digital technology. And the proof of our adaptation to the new configurations will lie in the Canadian creation of multi-signal programming forms that integrate audio, video and text/graphics signals with a satellite-based production/distribution strategy based on vertical and horizontal programming within and between a number of signals — that is to say, a Canadian form of programming that can **differentiate** itself from all the other signals in the continental media system.

The most obvious difference between Canada's information sector and



● Harold Adams Innis, 1895-1952

Photo: University of Toronto Archives

# The Canadian Difference in Media

or

## Why Harold Innis' Strategy for Culture Is More Relevant Today than Ever Before

that of the United States is the central role of the Canadian government in its development, as witnessed in the federal state's own activities in both production and regulation of the distribution of *all* forms of information, including its support (or lack of same) for the private sector. The Canadian state adopted this role not because of an inherent interest in production nor because it conceives of a cultural role for itself. The Canadian state's interests are **directly political**, as can be seen in the fact that it intervenes in the process of industry-building only when political and/or commercial pressures from outside Canada cause it to act to rationalize industry in the defence of sovereignty.

In this light, a clearly Canadian strategy of information-sector development (that would result in the creation of a unique information industry centred on the public sector) might consist of a policy-driven transfer of digital technology to both the production and consumption elements of the domestic information sector. Such a developmental approach dependent on technology transfer would entail large-scale industrial reorganization and downsizing of the management and regulatory levels of the sector currently dominating the public component. This would amount to a reorganization of federal-provincial public sectors by surrounding them with an expanded, decentralized, independent production sector **not** connected to American product-dependent distribution or exhibition interests. An integrated Canadian production/consumption system would direct audio/video and data into both media distribution and the education sectors (via provincial broadcasters), providing our information sector with the hardware and software it needs to survive in the satellite television area. Such a policy would be a way to "bias" the information flow within our information sector in favour of *Canadian* political, economic and cultural development in communications.

This approach is based on a view of culture first articulated in the late '40s and early '50s by Harold Innis' vision of civilization and communications technologies firmly rooted in the realities of Canada's political, economic, cultural and **military** history. To an unprecedented degree, Innis' strategy for culture is an intervention in the **present** cultural policy debate. By surveying and mapping the effects of changes in communications technologies on the administrative capacities of centralized

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and decentralized forms of government and industry, Innis identified the cultural consequences of relationships between imperial civilizations and countries in the margins of empires like Canada. Innis bluntly stated that Canada's position at the margins of both British and American empires forces it to survive by the innovative use of its unique **cultural** resources. Further, Innis argued that major structural flaws in Western civilization, exacerbated as of the latter part of the nineteenth century by developing communications technologies, had left America (and thus Canada) in the hands of an unholy alliance between media monopolies (e.g. today's Majors) and the executive branches of the American government. The U.S., Innis argued, is a politically unstable media giant with dangerous tendencies towards both commercial expansionism and militarism.

Years of analysis convinced Innis that at the core of this **political** malaise was an erosion in conceptions of both time and place caused by the impact of automated, commercialized and monopolistic American media on our oral culture, languages and literature, legal systems and media. A serious erosion in our understanding of Canadian history had weakened the traditional Canadian obsession with economic and political values rooted in Europe. The deluge of information products flowing in over the border was systematically destroying precisely those elements of permanence essential to our political, economic and cultural survival. In Innis' words:

*Whatever hope of continued autonomy Canada may have must depend on her success in withstanding American influence and in assisting the development of a third block designed to withstand the pressure of the United States and Russia. But there is little evidence that she is capable of such herculean efforts and much more that she is will con-*



*tinue to be regarded as an instrument of the United States.*

Innis' understanding was based in his command of the details of Canada's political and economic development mastered while writing his famous sectoral histories of the fur trade and cod fisheries. His "strategy for culture" approach to Canadian political survival has deep implications for Canadian public policy.

*The future of the West depends on the cultural tenacity of Europe and the extent to which it will refuse to accept dictation from a foreign policy developed in relation to demands of individuals in North America concerned with re-election. American foreign policy has been a disgraceful illustration of the irresponsibility of a powerful nation which promises little for the future stability of the western world. In the words of Professor Robert Peers, Canada must call in the Old World to redress the balance of the new....*

Innis based his most important perceptions on the process of technological change that had surrounded the collapse of the oral culture in the face of the rise of print technology. His thesis was that the nature and character of

new communications technologies change the core institutions of societies upon which they impact. He discovered that **all** media of communication influence listeners, readers, viewers' understanding of both time and space in ways reflected in political institutions and concepts of sovereignty. To continue to develop, marginal nations such as Canada must create communications systems that "bias" their societies and institutions in favour of their inhabitants **instead** of those of the imperial power.

Working against Canada's capacity to achieve these cultural objectives in the late 1940s, he felt, was social confusion caused by the negative effects of media-borne advertising on the form and content of the programming imported from the United States that filled the (U.S.-dominated) distribution system. Similar distortions were appearing in the output of all domestic media and working to destroy the coherent time-sense required for democracy to function. Public consciousness was being abandoned for private sensation – and political stability exchanged for war:

*Intellectual man of the nineteenth century was the first to estimate absolute nullity in time. The present – real, insistent, complex, and treated as an independent system, the foreshortening of practical prevision in the field of human action, has penetrated the most vulnerable areas of public policy. War has become the result, and a cause, of the limitations placed on the forethinker. Power and its assistant, force, the natural enemies of intelligence, have become more serious as the mental process activated in the pursuit and consolidation of power are essentially short range.*

The impact of the biased media on Canada's political institutions and culture was seen as profoundly damaging:

*The effects of these developments on Canadian culture have been disastr-*

*ous. Indeed they threaten national life. The cultural life of English-speaking Canadians subjected to the constant hammering from American commercialism is increasingly separated from the cultural life of French-speaking Canadians. American influence on the latter is checked by the barrier of the French language but is much less hampered by visual media.*

The social fragmentation was mirrored within the information sector itself where a complex process of industrial dislocation was occurring as the federal government struggled to maintain position in a rapidly developing media environment. At the core of the sector, the country's oral cultures – manifest in language and educational issues – attempted to adapt themselves to the new technological environment.

*In the period of 1915 to 1920 the theatre in French Canada was replaced by the movie and French influence by American. With the development of radio, protection of language enabled French Canadians to take part in the preparation of scripts and in the presentation of plays. During the Second World War the revue and the French-Canadian novel received fresh stimulus.*

There was no doubt about the situation. But what to do about it was a more difficult question; indeed, the very same question central to the current policy debate.

*We may dislike American influence, we may develop a Canadian underground movement, but we are compelled to yield to American policy. We may say that democracy has become something which Americans wish to impose on us because they say that they have it in the United States; we may dislike the assumption of Americans that have found the one and only way of life – but they have American dollars. It may*

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seem preposterous that North America should attempt to dictate to the cultural centres of Europe, France, Italy, Germany and Great Britain how they should vote and what education means – but it has American dollars. Yet loans and gifts are not the basis for friendship.

The integrated view of history evident in **Communications and Empire** and in his strategy of culture convinced Innis that our continued political existence on the continent depended on exchanging our passive relationship to developing American communications technologies for an active one. Acknowledging the loss of hegemony in our print media, Innis urged that all new media be exploited to the advantage of the Canadian public:

*The dangers to national existence warrant an energetic program to offset them. In new technological developments Canadians can escape the American influence in communications media other than those affected by appeals to "freedom of the press." The Canadian press has emphasized Canadian news but the American influence is powerful. In radio, on the other hand, the Canadian government in the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation has undertaken an active role in offsetting the influence of American broadcasters. It is hoped that its role will be even more active in television (for a while). The Film Board has been set up and designed to weaken the pressure of American films. The appointment and report*



*of the Royal Commission on National Development of the Arts and the Sciences imply a determination to strengthen our position. The reluctance of American branch plants to support research in Canadian educational institutions has been met by taxation and federal grants to the universities. Universities have taken a zealous interest in Canadian literature (e.g., Northrop Frye) but a far greater interest is needed in the whole field of the fine arts.*

This cultural strategy is based on **integration** of the sector's entire information production capacity in all media into both the media and the educational sectors' distribution systems, thereby creating a domestic production, distribution and consumption network designed to circulate uniquely Canadian forms of programming:

*We are indeed fighting for our lives. The pernicious influence of American advertising reflected especially in the periodical press and the powerful persistent impact of commercialism have been evident in all ramifications of Canadian life. The jackals of the communications system are constantly on the alert to destroy every vestige of sentiment towards Great Britain holding it of no advantage if it threatens the omnipotence of American commercialism. This is to strike at the heart of cultural life in Canada. The pride taken in improving our status in the British Commonwealth of Nations made it difficult for us to realize that our status on the North American continent is on the verge of disappearing. Continentalism assisted in the achievement of autonomy and has consequently become more dangerous. We can only survive by taking persistent action at strategic points against American imperialism in all its attractive guises. By attempting constructive efforts to explore the cultural possibilities of various media of communication and developing them along lines free from commercialism, Canadians might make a contribution to the cultural life of the United States by releasing it from dependence on the sale of tobacco and other commodities...*

In 1952 Canada was already in danger of losing its political, economic and cultural independence. Years of predominantly Liberal administration had left it

with a badly fragmented information sector, dangerously split along federal/provincial, (communications and educational) lines. In the years since Innis made these observations, a Liberal-dominated federal bureaucracy, unable or unwilling to respond to the problems Innis identified, allowed our information sector to further degenerate in the face of massive growth in the American capacity to both wage war and to generate information – the primary means they use to dominate the global political economy. Long before today's round of free-trade talks, Innis in 1952 had grasped Canada's fatal drift into the U.S. media-orbit:

*The effects of American technological change on Canadian cultural life have been finally evident in the numerous suggestions of American periodicals that Canada should join the United States. It should be said that this would result in greater consideration of Canadian sentiment by American periodicals than is at present the case when it probably counts for less than that of a religious sect.*

In the broader context of the rise of digital technology, the 1984 arrival of a new political administration in Ottawa is now forcing us to reappraise our approach to information in both the federal domain of communications and the provincial one of education. Once again, Innis suggests a way:

*Our study of the press has suggested that insistence on time as a uniform and quantitative continuum has obscured qualitative differences*

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and its disparate and discontinuous character. Advertisers build up monopolies of time to an important extent through the use of news. They are able to take full advantage of technical advances in communications and to place information before large numbers at the earliest possible moment. Marked changes in the speed of communication have far reaching effects on monopolies over time because of their impact on the most sensitive elements of the economic system. It is suggested that it is difficult to over-estimate the significance of technological change in communication or the position of monopolies built up by those who take advantage of it. The disequilibrium created by the character of technological change in communication strikes at the heart of the economic system and has profound implications for the study of business disturbance. Freedom of the press as guaranteed by the Bill of Rights in the United States has become the great bulwark of monopolies of time. The results of the American revolution hang heavily over the world's destiny. It should be clear that improvements in communications tend to divide mankind, and perhaps I may be excused for ending this lecture without encroaching on copyright by using the words of one of Aldous Huxley's novels, 'Time must have a stop.'

Innis' strategy of Canadian media-culture development, then, brings into coherence the key structural elements of Canada's particular response and integration of continental technological change forced upon it by its marginality in the larger American media imperium.

In Innis' perspective, marginality, passivity and fragmentation become the cultural structures of the first moment of Canada's response, out of which a distinctly Canadian synthetic reintegration emerges. The fragmentation/integration dialectic of Canada's response brings clearly into focus: 1) the central role played by the state, 2) the political character of Canada's communications sector, and 3) the resulting mixed media character of Canadian production traditions. The remainder of this article attempts to apply Innis to the overall communications sector (i.e., policy & production traditions) as a contribution to the definition of a distinct Canadian media identity.

#### Fragmentation in the Canadian industry

*"It should be clear that improvements in communications tend to divide mankind" – Harold Innis*

Most characteristic of the entire Canadian media system is the complete isolation of its components from one another due, in part, to the insulation from homogenizing marketplace pressures provided by state subsidization. Extreme fragmentation exacerbated by uneven development, geographic separation, cultural differences, and the overwhelming disorientation caused by the domination of the



marketplace by an imported culture are what characterize Canadian media.

Nevertheless, Canada has developed unique types of production, each with their own particular sets of working relationships between crew members, abilities to carry information, fill airtime cost-effectively, and bring readers/listeners/viewers to high levels of emotional involvement – but manifested in institutions that are each very different one from another, and have continued to develop in isolation. Institutional development, from the CBC in 1932, the Film Board in 1939, CBC-TV in 1952, to the CFDC in 1968, reveals a pattern of sporadic federal interventions, an isolation that reaches its critical peak in the 1985 collapse of Quebec's Bill 109 as a result, among other factors, of the uncoordinated nature of federal/provincial interventions in the sector. The recurring problem of long-term commitment of funds which, unresolved, produces institutional zig-zags from the CFDC to the tax-shelter to the Broadcast Fund, has led to the creation of components of an industry politically and culturally required to offset American pressure, but *unable to do so as an industry*.

Some of the roots of the fragmentation can be found in the conflicting relationships between the information sector itself, and the federal state. The departmental structure adopted by the Canadian government as it emerged as a nation in the 19th century was borrowed from Great Britain, a highly centralized and geographically concentrated nation. However, the developmental problems faced by the Canadian state are incomprehensible from the centre of the empire. In its efforts to regulate economic development, the government responded to this weakness in its departmental structure by the creation of a confused jumble of agencies sprinkled around the federal and provincial apparatus. But these agencies, albeit in an extremely unsystematic manner, were designed to regulate some aspect of either transportation/communications and/or education – i.e., to rationalize activities within the critical information sector of the economy. Not until the creation of the federal Department of Communications was this well-enough defined in the eyes of the federal state to warrant a specific ministry (a cultural blindspot that results from colonial status) and then it was only clear from the technological side.

Further, this fragmentation was reinforced by the alienation of one medium from the other. The sequential nature of technology assimilation (film, radio,

TV) organized each medium into antagonistic blocs: eg., the NFB vs. CBC, CBC vs. private television, public sector vs. private sector, and vice-versa.

#### The Canadian Tradition

However, the "political objective" at the core of Canada's domestic communications sector and its state-centered "one system" approach to development has, at least in the past, resulted in a "top down" (traditional) strategy. Change based on the creation of new program forms (such as multi-signal programming strategy) becomes possible because of the central position of the federal state in co-ordinating activities within the sector. In Canada, "industrial revolution" is produced *politically* (eg. the Broadcasting Act).

To secure Canadian information channels, the Canadian state has to support the public sector. The American state, however, attempts to ensure that American information flows into Canada's market for both political and commercial reasons and that the money generated in Canada's market continues to flow back to the U.S. private sector. This political economic reality has produced on the continent two different approaches to what information is and how it should be processed, each of which is enshrined in the respective political and cultural institutions of Canada and the United States. The two approaches to information production are now contesting positions in the continental media environment, with our *money-in, information-out political approach* threatened by the American *information-in, money-out system*.

Canada's present *ad hoc* posture is a mixture of American, international and indigenous production traditions. American forms of production programming coming over the border with each new wave of technology contain within them assumptions about "production" based on conditions in the American industry, conditions which did not and do not exist in Canada. Neither do the technologies/techniques nor the programming forms match Canadian realities or political necessities. As a result, a process of adaptation is necessary to integrate the technologies/techniques into Canadian styles of production.

In Canada, the process of technological adaptation results in the creation of a different overall organization of the industry. Given the Canadian public/private split, there is, except for the small pay-TV industry (or Cineplex-Odeon, which is a special case) no vertical integration of the private sector with the distribution system. And the public sector corporate structures with different production processes and products are at present badly fragmented.

The Canadian private-sector is composed only of a number of sub-components: a production capacity component vertically integrated into the private broadcasting sector; four of five entertainment feature-film production companies *de facto* vertically integrated into the American-product distribution empire; a decentralized film/video production component concentrating on information, AV, and industrial forms of production for *domestic* television; and, lastly, a component that

devotes itself to the production of television commercials, the only part of the private sector with corporate stability due to vertical integration into the advertising industry. In Canada, independent production is severely underdeveloped, and does not function as a coherent sector.

Efforts to produce in the private sector are subject to the same range of limiting forces – exclusion from the distribution system (both public and multi-national), and the general inability of Canada's secondary manufacturing sector, of which program production is a part, to attract private capital investment. Furthermore, unclear and varying relationships with public agencies (Telefilm) and regulators (CRTC) have produced private production for public distribution that is *ad hoc* and lacking consistent criteria. Regulators do provide stimulatory measures in response to changing political and economic concerns, but no comprehensive plan of development. Entrepreneurial zeal becomes the only ongoing source of continuity generated from within the private sector which, for the most part, sees independent producers through untenable situations but can also lead to inordinate risk-taking and overcommitment that alienates investors.

As a result, the private sector tends to develop "truncated" corporate structures. Organizations, unable to engage in the critical R&D required to design new product production systems corresponding to the national and international market conditions, are forced to assimilate product design and production processes from R&D done either in the U.S. or by Canada's public production apparatus. But given commercial objectives, they usually choose to imitate successful U.S. forms of production, while lacking the infrastructure required to produce them. Given the time-lag in transfer of technologies and techniques from the U.S. to Canada, the imitation program forms are outmoded by the time they are assimilated; the product is second-rate, and the Canadian private sector finds itself competing against *Miami Vice* with *Night Heat*.

Both public and private traditions in Canada have at their core tensions which result from the differences between imported forms of production and domestic ones. The forms of production imported from the U.S. reflect the political economy of the U.S. with its overriding commercial objectives, while Canadian domestic production forms reflect our political economy with its overriding political objective, the result of the dominance of the public sector in the system. These tensions are heightened by the fact that the marketplace and the visual culture in general are dominated by the commercial culture of the American production system. Canadian production teams are thus put in a position where they are forced to compete with the aesthetic that accompanies U.S. product into the domestic market, an aesthetic which includes the kinds of production values the American system produces. Our production teams who must reference themselves to the marketplace are forced to compete with American production values using a completely different production system. The wonder

is that in this competition they emerge as winners during periods of innovation – but as losers during times of stagnation.



### The Canadian difference

Canada's production system is organized differently because production program forms here have been affected by the value systems extant within the public sector which are not the same as those dominating the American information sector. The political nature of the Canadian state's commitment to the industry results in political-cultural mandates – e.g. "to interpret Canada to Canadians" – designed to sponsor national consciousness and unity. State support results in a production infrastructure that has to and can respond to three different mandates, political, cultural and commercial, whereas the American system has only a commercial objective, whose political effects are also a result of commercial success.

A decentralized production process results from the political objectives attached to public funding. Unlike the centralized American studio system, Canadian program production teams are forced during pre-production to deal with events that unfold in some place other than the production centre. As a result, pre- and post-production are decentralized while production (information collection) is, for the most part, on-location – that is, anywhere in

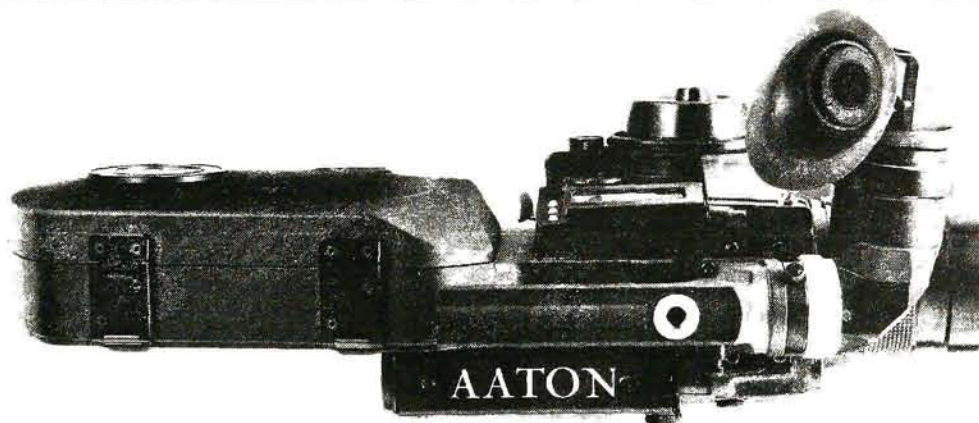
this vast country. In broadcasting, *As It Happens*, *Morningside* or *The Journal* use landlines or satellites which give a centralized production unit an expanded, decentralized collection capacity.

Not only are most Canadian production forms decentralized, but usually the objective of the production process is to "cover" some unpredictable, non-scripted or journalistic event – unpredictable because it is not staged, but rather a real event occurring in its own time and space and according to its own internal logic, not the logic of the studio. This basic reality results in production units which emerge from the collection process with usable material often after only brief contact with the subject. As a result, the crew interact

with each other and the technology more dynamically than in the scripted, more controlled type of production which is at the core of the American systems. And in the context of our broadcast forms, this results in self-programming production units. These production units (again *Morningside*, *As It Happens* and *The Journal* are outstanding public sector examples, but John McGreevy's *Peter Ustinov's Russia* is an equally good example of this in the private sector) have the best cost/airtime ratios in the entire system, producing cheaper forms of programming than our American-derivative production units, and they serve the important political function (news and current affairs) that causes the state to maintain funding levels.

Canadian production teams also tend to be smaller: there is more mobility within the production team; people move in and out of different job functions and program forms more easily. Canadian crews in periods of innovation tend to bend the rules about how things should be done to get the technology more up against the subject-matter. There is in the tradition a more flexible attitude to how things are done, thus greater capacity for innovation. The concepts of executive-producer in CBC radio and television, and of "filmmaker" in film production, results in the creation of program forms and program-design processes that stress communication more via the programs' overall structure and form

rather than just its dialogue (text or script component). In broadcast forms where the information collection stage is less structured due to its real-time nature, the post-production process becomes more important as the stage at which the program is structured. A sophisticated editorial process, rooted in "line up," tends to stress impact via juxtapositions of information in time, creating *unique apparently real-time* assemblies of information (*As It Happens*, *The Journal*). Both American and British production forms tend to stress less complex assemblages of information. But in Canada the tradition of communications via strings of images continued to develop whereas they ceased in the dominant production centres with the arrival of sound production. The Canadian capacity to edit both picture and sound in post-production thus became one of our main production strengths. A comparison of the *montage* aspects of U.S. commercial cinema and ours quickly establishes the superiority of Canadian domestic production forms. In the U.S., Academy Awards for editing are, for the most part, based on short and, by comparison, crude, action sequences, strung together by voice and performance, while Canadian program forms often include long picture and sound montages running the full length of the program. Of course, these tendencies are not absolute, given that our tradition also contains techniques drawn from imported traditions.



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