

The Technological Imagination of Public Media

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Introduction

Although it has been nearly four decades since Raymond Williams' book *Television: technology and cultural form* (Williams, 2003/1975) was first published, I find it helpful to return to this seminal work with a view of reflecting on the future of public media in Canada. *Television* is often remembered for Williams' critique of technological determinism in Marshall McLuhan's theory of media. But the book should also be remembered for a number of other significant contributions, including the prescient chapter titled "Alternative technology, alternative uses?" in which Williams examined some of the innovations in broadcasting technologies being developed at the time. For Williams, these innovations represented at once a risk and an opportunity. The risk was that people in the United States and the United Kingdom who were in a position to shape the implementation of these innovations would remain complacent, allowing their deployment to be 'sorted out as we go' (Williams, 2003/1975, p. 140). The opportunity was that changes to broadcasting infrastructure could afford people the chance to address structural inequities and imagine alternative uses. Williams believed that the early stages in implementing new technological innovations represented an opportune moment for putting in place alternative organizational and policy arrangements for television broadcasting.

Revisiting Williams' work in the context of a reflection on the future of public media in Canada reminds us that media institutions, especially public media institutions, not only have a stake in shaping what content is available to the public, they also have a stake in how communication infrastructure is designed and used for creating and sharing this content.

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Few decision makers in today's media institutions would seriously promote the same kind of 'sorting it out as we go' approach that worried Williams in the 1970s. Silicon Valley's 'disruptive technologies' and 'upgrade culture' have had an undeniable impact on traditional media over the past four decades. As Canada's national public broadcaster, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation/Radio Canada (CBC) has assimilated this 'Californian ideology' (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996) into its own vision for the future including their five year strategic plan titled *2015: Everyone, Every Way*:

"We connect with Canadians on digital platforms where, when and how they want us to be in their daily lives. New media is profoundly transforming how individuals consume and interact with information, entertainment and content. Technology is giving people more control over their lives and the media they use. As part of our five-year strategy, we want to give Canadians the tools they need to tailor CBC/Radio-Canada programming to their specific interests and requirements." (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2011, p. 4)

These official statements by the CBC give us an insight into what scholars of information and communication technologies refer to as a "socio-technological imaginaire" (Flichy, 2007) or "social imagination of technology" (Mansell, 2012). Technological imagination can be defined as collective representations of technology and how these shared meanings shape the design and use of technologies. This imaginary operates as a site for the realization of multiple potentialities, of different and

possibly competing ideals for the configuration of relations of power. The technological imagination that guides and inspires decision makers at the CBC matters to the future of public media.

Keeping up

The excerpt quoted above refers to 'new media' in a way that indicates a rather uncritical acceptance of digital infrastructure as a source of continuous change beyond anyone's control. These statements are different from the 'sort it out as we go' view of technological change. But they suggest a similar kind of complacency in which ones resigns oneself to the constant technological churn (see Papacharissi, Streeter, & Gillespie, 2013; Sterne, 2003) and to an 'upgrade culture' (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006) wherein a creator must continually learn new skills related to the latest app and an audience member is a fickle consumer who is always on the lookout for the latest platform for consuming content. In such a technological imagination, it is simply a matter of keeping up with the latest disruptive technological solution.

Is the CBC here to reinforce such a dominant technological imaginary? Is the objective of its creators to continually readjust the trajectory of public media infrastructure development in a way that parallels the technological innovations designed by Yahoo, Google, Facebook, and Netflix?

Alternative Technological Imaginations

Instead of cursing these technological innovations as the source of a frenetic pace of change, part of a perpetual march towards the new, we should take Williams' advice and interpret these interruptions to the status quo as opportunities to reevaluate the direction we are currently taking and attempt to glean what alternative visions these technologies might support. Public media can shape, and be shaped, by such alternative visions: identifying and nurturing different ideas for the future of public communication infrastructure that reflects the values and beliefs of those it claims to serve.

This type of approach is not about seeking a technological fix to a specific problem but about encouraging more ambitious and inventive ways of designing and using public media technologies. One example of this approach is the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) recent announcement that it has signed a memorandum of understanding to explore new uses of open data and open standards with the Open Knowledge Foundation, the Open Data Institute, the Mozilla Foundation (who distributes Firefox), and Europeana. The details of this memorandum and a more in-depth discussion of what constitutes open data are beyond the scope of this paper (for more details on the former, see Lesage (2014), and for examples of the latter, see Gurstein (2011)). Broadly speaking, open data represents a set of principles related to the collection, analysis and distribution of data rather than a specific technology or a technological solution. It is part of a different kind of approach to imagining the future of digital infrastructure. As an example of how these principles apply to broadcasting, one of the aims of the BBC agreement is to make clear and transparent technical standards available to organizations that want to work with the BBC. This alternative technological imagination for public media is also being explored here in Canada. The RC Lab in Montreal has been experimenting with ways to change the culture among journalists and other content creators related to digital media (Lesage, 2014). Open data is by no means a 'fringe' movement but its future direction remains uncertain. Media organizations are currently exploring how to adapt its principles to the way they deliver information to their audiences (Lesage & Hackett, 2013). Whether broadcasters like the CBC decide to apply these principles in ways that present real alternatives to the current state of media likely depends on the extent to which decision makers have the courage to embrace an alternative technological imagination.

Conclusion

One reason why the future of digital infrastructure is of critical importance to the future of public media is the way infrastructure is embedded into our everyday lives (Lievrouw, 2002, p.7). It is, for the most part, designed to be taken-for-granted. Periods of rapid technological change interrupt this taken-for-grantedness and offer us opportunities to wonder at the alternative possibilities.

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