

BARKING AT THE WATCHDOG

THE MEDIA SOCIETY: Evidence About Mass Communication in America  
Everette E. Dennis, Wm. C. Brown Co.,  
Iowa 1978, 166 pp.

THE TANGLED NET: Basic Issues in Canadian Communications,  
Patricia Hindley, Gail Martin & Jean McNulty,  
J.J. Douglas Ltd., Vancouver 1977, 183 pp.

*A Review by  
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In the past, the academic study of communications has suffered the accusation of bearing a similar relationship to practice in the media, as jurisprudence bears to law; in both fields theoretical or analytic refinements have been of little real interest to practitioners. However, as the scientism of the sixties wanted, so too did the cultish quest for fundamental underlying principles of communication. The seventies have witnessed the emergence of a new strain of communication research which construes communications as a fundamental social process and not as an epiphenomenon of culture. The momentum of this new approach resulted in a shift in the aspirations of the communication researcher from empiricist explanation to 'critical' analysis. The metier was meant to be issues and policy; success was to be gauged by reactions and changes provoked from within the media themselves. In the debate which ensued, the effects of the media, their history, and even falsified assumptions about media processes were marshalled into new arguments designed to threaten the media with legislation, or at least further commissions of enquiry.

The media thus found themselves vulnerable to a contradiction of their own making. The myth of pluralism demanded the illusion of diversity of voice and interest within the ideological market of North American media, a demand which contradicts the centralist corporate nature and mass marketing biases of their economic structure. This commitment to the invisible hand of the public interest which is meant to be served by the media in their drive for private profit, has in fact provided enough leverage to establish a seemingly endless series of commissions, hearings, new legislation and restructured regulatory bodies - all much to the benefit and pride of the academicians. Yet for all this effort and in spite of cable, satellite and other new technologies, media practices remain by and large unchanged. The unsubtle blend of violence and trivia still pours forth from the box, and each evening ritualistically closes with the newsman's carefully articulated assurances that the system survives (more or less the same) for another day.

Both of these books present summary reviews of the media from the perspective that has been developing through the seventies. The implicit assumption that policy formulation will be central to the future of the media anchors both books in optimism about change. If only we do the right research and guide the governments into the right decisions, minor adjustments to the media can help to set the future right. But here the similarity ends. To the American, Dennis, faith is rooted in the effectiveness of good journalism as a social force; to the Canadian authors hope is derived from a regionally based national integrity that longs to be cultivated by new technology. This difference, I believe, is related to an important underlying distinction between the recent perspectives that have been adopted in American and Canadian communications research.

Typically, the American book, The Media Society is designed for an introductory course in communication - in all likelihood for the journalism trainees who are meant to be the major agents of change in the institutional environment. Of its type, the book is fluent and up-to-date. It provides a reasonably thorough treatment of such topics as television and children, violence on TV, and the new journalism. The author relies upon empirical investigations to inform the debate, yet the book also broadens its scope just enough to mention the cultural and literary dimensions of communication research.

The book is subtitled "Evidence about mass communications in America". Even the cover illustration of a hearing microphone is there to remind us that the public's image of reality is predominantly shaped (in the post-Watergate era) by the media. Dennis takes his inspiration from within television's image of the world on trial. He combines the two mythic heroes that reign in this realm, the detective-journalist and the inquisitor-attorney and subsumes them in his analysis of the role of the media. Much of the book is given over to a discussion of a realignment of these roles; the social scientist becomes the attorney and the media the accused. To recognize the power of the media as a social force in the American way of life is to realize the need for regulation and restraint; to insure that they continue to perform their non-partisan role, the book proposes that the social sciences become the leash on the watchdog. Research into communications will base the regulation of the media within the rational framework of empirically derived social policy.

Although admirable enough in its liberal way, The Media Society also reveals the traditional blindspots of American communications research. The author seems entirely unaware of research trends outside the United States, or of communication systems which are not equally based on the twin premises of "free press" and "free enterprise". This failure is particularly unfortunate, for the journalism student might well benefit from an introduction to the range of international alternatives in media practices, and especially to the media research traditions of Britain, Sweden and Japan. Not surprisingly there is no discussion of the legitimating, one-dimensionalizing aspects of the media from the perspective Critical Theory. The review ventures no further left than Tom Wolfe and Journalism Chic. Of particular note is the lack of mention of Herbert Schiller's work on American cultural imperialism, a research domain that has raised considerable

'interest even within America itself. The liberal, pluralistic and corporate framework within which the media operate in America remains as the unquestioned background to this "critical overview" of the media.

*TANGLED NET opens debate on policy*

To this approach, The Tangled Net provides some contrast without relief. The authors, all located at Simon Fraser University, have a mission, which is to provide background for the discussion of the basic issues in Canadian communication policy from a Canadian point of view. Their purpose is to open rather than close the debate about communication policy. The reason is obvious. Unlike the United States, the media and the issue of their role in Canadian society, have been the object of apathy rather than interest. In this respect, the discursive style and lack of scholarly pretense is wholly appropriate if, for the purpose of popularizing this issue.

The difficulty of the book, however, which I think reflects the Canadianized perspective on the media, is revealed in the book's hidden agenda. The arguments in the Tangled Net are based upon brief historical accounts and extracts from government policy documents. The book discusses the issues of Canadian communication within the frame of reference identified by government, and its regulatory agencies. And, although the authors deny the spectre of technological determinism in their attempts to identify issues, by following the government lead they succumb to it. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the conceptual organization of the book dissected into chapters based upon different media (TV, radio, magazines, etc.). As such, the book becomes less interested in defining issues in Canadian communications than with the problems of developing a policy for technologies. The unfortunate effect is to obscure the influences of other social forces and institutions which influence the performance of the media. By adopting the policy categories established by government to regulate specific media, the authors establish no critical point of reference from which to view the processes which underly government intervention and regulation or evaluate the effectiveness of these policies. The overview is suppressed by the immediacy of the particular regulatory problems. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that the legitimating and economic functions of the media, and the intricacies of their interrelationship, the comparison of the achievements of public and private networks, and the broad implications of an increasingly fictionalized reality, remain beyond the scope identified by the authors. And, although many aspects of these issues are touched upon, the force of their mention is lost in the policy-bound technological bias.

Two examples suffice to illustrate this point. The economics of the media, following the Davey Committee Report, are discussed briefly under the aegis of corporate cross ownership limiting the 'diversity of voices' in the information marketplace. And so, like the Davey Committee, their concern extends to the Canadianization of talent, production and broadcasting sections. They overlook the fact that the most central economic aspect in the media system is the advertising agencies, and that these are predominantly foreign owned and controlled.

*Profitability is not explored*

Moreover, the profitability of the media is not explored, particularly in the cable and telecommunications sectors where profit and services rendered have long been divorced. And with good reason, this question will continue to be overlooked by government policy-makers. Unlike its American counterpart, the Canadian government has never adopted a policy of detailed and regular reporting of the media's accounting, preferring the high profile image of the CRTC hearing to establish the semblance of corporate responsibility to government. And, of course, the part played by the media in the regulation of the consumer marketplace by gathering large audiences for corporate advertisers, or in popularizing and legitimating government policy (government being the largest single national advertiser), are hardly issues that are likely to emerge in the deliberations of government agencies.

Another example of the inadequacy of The Tangled Net's approach to the defining of issues for Canada's communications debate is illustrated by the way the discussion of television is quickly drawn into the debate about the remedies for the reputed low quality of Canadian production. The question has specifically been posed in terms of 'quality' by the CRTC as well, in order to avoid the rather embarrassing fact that this agency continues to have absolutely no influence on the content of television programming. **The CRTC has never even attempted to rectify the imbalance between information, entertainment and educational programming prescribed for the television media in the Broadcasting Act, nor have their blandishments about community programming had any significant influence on television production. The regulatory mandate of the CRTC prevents it from becoming a real force in communications policy.** And so, even the great Canadian content debate avoids the use of any real content category - rather, the definition is based upon the nationality of the production house, the actors or the script. We are ensured of increasingly Canadian made programs, but not necessarily Canadian content and form. Problematic as this issue is, communication policy in Canada is really designed as an elaborate ruse to avoid the central issue of communications, which remains that of ideology. This will continue to be the case unless we are ready to debate the crucial issue of the social role of the media, and not merely the technology for transmission of electric signals.

By way of summary it is interesting to contrast the American Canadian approaches to communications policy. The American view starts with a concern for "roles and functions" of the mass media; but this concern is quickly focused on the institutions of journalism and cultural ethics. The political dimensions of communication presented in this way are always partisan or pluralist, and carefully separated from the realm of economic interests. That the main force in television and most other media remains the delivery of large audiences to advertisers is diligently overlooked; and the question of who controls the media scrupulously avoided. Although the American authors have set out with the ambition of analysing the role of the media in society, they have followed the research dollars into the politically safe domains of sex and violence on television, and partisan balance in news bias.

The Canadian approach, aimed at kindling the national debate remains almost disinterested in research and fascinated with new technological alternatives. In accepting the limits of the debate laid out in federal policy papers, a different set of issues quickly lose their essential context when analyzed as problems of technology. The authors' hope that communications policy can be designed to promote regional cultural integrity thus remains an unsubstantiated and underdeveloped afterthought in the conclusion of the book.

My own hope is that the Canadian concern for new technology and who will control it, will be balanced by an open and detailed discussion about the social role of communications in Canadian Society.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Canadian researchers have tended to overlook the importance of the advertising industry in broadcasting economics, particularly in terms of ownership and control. Data indicating the extent of American control of the advertising agencies has been available for a number of years in Foreign Ownership and the Advertising Industry, prepared for the Select Committee on Economic and Cultural Nationalism of the Ontario Legislature, 1973. For a recent interpretation of the importance of this aspect see Joanne Stone, The Context and Roles of Television Advertising in Canada, Masters Paper Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, 1978.
2. This point has been raised by Dallas Smythe in his introduction to Robert Babe, Cable and Television and Telecommunications in Canada, MSU International Business and Economic Studies, Michigan State, 1975, pp. xxi.

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years, many of our arts have been notable, yet it is also true that as long as we define "art" and "culture" in traditional, European-derived terms, some of us may suspect that art and culture in Canada are largely imitations of European forms.

We look in vain for the unique contribution to culture and for our own Canadian identity so long as we concentrate on the most familiar forms and contents. Perhaps the real uniqueness of Canadian identity and culture eludes us because we persist in thinking about and perceiving culture through colonial and post-colonial frameworks.

It is possible that the uniqueness of late twentieth century Canadian culture is to be found in the most advanced communications systems, some of which have been developed in Canada, and where the "media mix" is highly original. It is plausible that Canadian Art and culture (and their contribution to the formation of Canadian identity) are to be found most highly developed in forms, structures and systems than in contents. In other words,

Canadian culture is communication.

What is proposed in this pilot project is the exploration of this proposition.