

REVIEW ESSAY

Benjamin D. Singer

**Communications in Canadian Society**  
Don Mills: Addison-Wesley, 1983.

Reviewed by  
Robert M. Pike  
Department of Sociology  
Queen's University

The first edition of this book was published by Copp Clark in 1972, followed by a second revised edition in 1975. Now a third revised edition has appeared along with a new publisher. But beware all teachers who wish to use papers from this edition in their courses, because it is properly described not as "the third edition", but the "Addison-Wesley edition". For many years, my relationship with the reserve room librarian at Queen's University was clouded by the presence of perturbed students all claiming that the copy of Singer's book held in the library did not contain the essential readings which I had recommended to them. Invariably, it turned out that the library was holding the first edition, and that I had recommended a piece which could only be found in the second revised edition. Since this new edition contains twenty-seven essays compared with the previous edition's twenty-four, and nine of the twenty-seven have not been published before in the anthology, the chance of a communications gap between the reserve librarian and I have been greatly increased. So be very specific in your requests to the library.

Evidently, with three editions in eleven years, the anthology has been a commercial success. Part of the success rests, no doubt, upon its scholarly merits, but part rests also in a lack of competitors in the Canadian college book market. In his preface to the first edition, Singer noted that the book was the first one in **Canada** to provide communications courses with a wide range of materials on social issues in Canadian communications. Eleven years later, it is still the only home-grown anthology with this social issues orientation, although Liora Salter's *Communication Studies in Canada* (1980) is now available to relatively advanced students who have an interest in Canadian-based applications of the methodologies and theories of communication analysis. Such methodologies and theories, are not, except incidentally, a central focus of Singer's book. Being designed to appeal to a wide student audience in arts, social science and professional programmes, and with the overall objective being "to provide the greatest possible number of different perspectives from which to view [past, present and future] communications in Canada", the complexities of structuralism, cultural reproduction theory and the social defining of reality are rarely allowed to reveal themselves to what would be, one suspects, a largely unappreciative clientele. Some theory is there -- Harold Innis gets lots of mentions, and the concept of mass society pops up now and then -- but the book's emphasis rests heavily upon the presentation of essays which are, as one of my students put it, "straight-forward and easy to read" as befits its interdisciplinary aims.

As mentioned above, this new edition shows some substantial changes from the earlier ones, but it shows considerable continuity as well. Thus, in the first and second editions, the

essays were divided into four sections entitled respectively "Social Forces and Communications Media," "Control of Communications Media," "Identity, Unity and Mass Communication," and "Social Problems and Communication," while in the second edition only a resource guide was tagged on at the end. In the Addison-Wesley edition, the resource guide has been scrapped, as have a number of papers which were either hoary with age or did not speak well to current issues, but the four sections remain and are supplemented by a fifth entitled, "Participation and the Communications Media." So also have been retained seventeen of the titles of essays which appeared in the second edition, albeit only a few of these have been republished without revision in their original form "because of their classic or historical significant status." One might debate with Singer on some of his choices here: for example, his own 1970 content analysis of violence and protest on Canadian and American news broadcasts has been left unchanged, although -- as he recognized at the time -- a comparison of news violence on the publicly funded CBC with news violence on commercial CBS was arguably less appropriate (and, in my view, certainly less appropriate) than a comparison between a Canadian and a commercial network. Again, while Alvin Toffler's comments on "Mass Media: A Force in Identity Change" taken from his book *Future Shock* (1970) do indeed have a classical ring, parts of the essay are now classically ironic: for example, Singer lets pass without comment Toffler's observation that astronaut John Glenn, who is currently tagged as a presidential hopeful for the Democratic Party, then had -- like Twiggy -- a decayed public image!

Still, this is a little picayune. The essays which are new to this edition exceed the unrevised in number, and are concerned mainly with

current issues in the Canadian communication field: for example, the evolution of national press policies; the nature of Canadian advertising control institutions; microelectronics and the office of the future; media and elite structure; minorities and the media; communications in the Canadian North; the role of the newspaper consumer ombudsman; the future of Canadian communications. To pin down particular shifts in the themes emphasized in the anthology is not easy to do, but Singer does appear to have been particularly concerned to strengthen the component devoted to the impact of social and technical forces upon media institutions, corporate structures and individuals. For example, among the new essays, James Taylor's "The Office of the Future: Weber and Innis Revisited" contrasts the centralizing tendency in intra-organizational communications of the mainframe computer with the decentralizing tendency of the microprocessor. On the other side of the coin, Singer's "Incommunicado Social Machines" is a perceptive account of how technological advances in organizational communications are being increasingly utilized to ignore or sidestep consumers' concerns and complaints (that is, various levels of technology can be used to increase communication or to stymie it in the best traditions of mass society). If a consumer does not get satisfaction, one supposes that he or she can turn to the newspaper consumer ombudsperson. However, John Hannigan's early (1970 - 1971) study of consumer complaints to the ombudsman for the **London Free Press** suggests that the power of the press in the area of consumer relations is relatively limited. Finally, having cued into the phrase "the power of the press", one can turn to John Hannigan's other essay which is a brief survey of sociological research on the ideological role of Canadian elites in influencing media content, and also Andrew Osler's review of the socio-

historical, economic and technical context within which the Kent Commission recommendations were framed. Then, to add a textual footnote, there is Tom McPhail's essay on "The Future of Canadian Communications" which predicts that by the twenty-first century our daily newspapers will have been transformed to computerized videotex systems. This may be true, but it is in my conservative nature to believe that all technical change is not progress. How does one fold a videotex system when it is needed for reading on the commuter train, or for swatting flies?

By what criteria can one assess the quality and value of an anthology of essays on a diversity of topics aimed at a wide college market? My rule of thumb approach in such a case is to judge whether the editor succeeds, either through an introductory essay or detailed introductory remarks, in highlighting the relevance of the individual papers in the context of the major themes which are covered in the book. Again, does he or she succeed in showing the thematic interlinkages between sections and papers which might otherwise appear to be unconnected? Beyond these criteria of obvious editorial competency, one might ask whether the new additions to the anthology, as well as the revisions of previously included essays, do create a product which is significantly a scholarly improvement (which means more than just "updated") over the previous edition? Finally, wherein lies the strengths and weaknesses of the anthology in its present form?

First, the work of the editor. I admit to a personal bias in favour of anthologies which commence with substantial introductory essays written by their editors. Ideally, these essays demonstrate the interconnections between sections and papers, link authors' arguments to

relevant scholarly literature or policy issues in the wider marketplace of ideas, and generally act as golden threads which guide student and teacher through the thematic labyrinth. Such an essay may, however, be most appropriate in anthologies which have one dominating disciplinary perspective, and since the essays in Singer's book reflect the wide-ranging academic and occupational interests of their authors, its absence in this case may not be particularly critical (although I suppose it could be argued that the wide variety of perspectives explored in the book makes the need for an introductory essay more critical). In any event, the brief introductions which Singer provides at the beginning of each section are quite successful in demonstrating the relevance of the papers contained therein to major issues of communications policy and research. They are less successful, however, in pointing out interlinkages and contradictions between the various essays; and sometimes downright frustrating in their failure to provide updates on the information contained in those essays which have not been revised. A couple of examples must suffice here. The reader of Terence Qualter's paper on "Propaganda in Canadian Society" is introduced to the argument that propaganda should not be defined as dealing with issues in an one-sided or distorted manner -- what is being communicated may well be true -- but rather as the deliberate manipulation of symbols to manipulate attitudes and thereby behavior. Singer describes this definition as "less value laden" than the traditional view, but at no point does he attempt to link Qualter's definition to the clearly traditional view of propaganda contained in the excerpt from the **Report of the Special Committee on Hate Propaganda in Canada** (1966) which appears in another section of the book. On a different track, Sandra Gwyn's essay on "Citizens' Communications in Canada" was written in 1974 or 1975, and is

filled with descriptions of early Canadian experiments in the development of community radio and community media resource centres, many of which were clearly of doubtful financial viability at the time. We are never told, however, by Singer (or alternatively through an updating of the essay itself) what the ultimate fate of many of these experiments has been. It is, as I say, frustrating: so when Singer's book moves toward a second Addison-Wesley edition, he might well consider the possibility of some expansion in the scope of his editorial task.

As to the overall quality of this edition, I do find that I have recommended substantially more of the essays to the students enrolled in my mass communications course than was ever the case with the earlier editions. This is mainly because many of the new essays in the book, as well as most of those retained and revised, combine to make this anthology both more topical and more scholarly than its predecessors. Singling out essays for specific mention may be invidious, but my personal vote for the best among the new and the revised go to five authors who provide a fairly brief, yet highly perceptive, coverage of their topics in a form which, if not for the existence of Singer's book, would not be readily available to students. Three have already been mentioned -- Osler's essay on national press policy, Singer's essay on incomunicado social machines and Taylor's look at the office of the future using the theories of Weber and Innis. To these I would add W. Brian Stewart's discussion of the dilemmas of English-language Canadian T. V. programming in the face of audiences wedded to U. S. escapist entertainment (does Canadian programming try to copy it or concentrate on current affairs and "culture"?), and Thelma McCormack's sociologically insightful "Censorship and 'Community' Standards in Canada". Professor McCormack's revised paper

incorporates an exploration of the current feminist stance against pornography which is no less disturbing and controversial than many of her other views on censorship. Where else, given the plaudits for the National Film Board's film, **Not A Love Story**, would one find the suggestion that the women who made the film succeeded in legitimatizing their anti-pornography views through the stigmatization of those pornographic movie actresses whom they had interviewed?

In her book on Canadian communications, Liora Salter notes that, in comparison with the emphasis on media effects research in the United States, "most commonly, Canadian studies look at the media system rather than its specific content, at regulatory problems rather than media effects. When content is discussed, it is often to take into account how Canadian consciousness is shaped by current political debates, by proximity to the United States, by Canadian commitment to state intervention in broadcasting or the economy." So it is with **Communications in Canadian Society** in which one can find many essays on these themes, but only a couple which attempt directly to measure media content, and none which seek explicitly to isolate the effects of a communications process upon a population. The strengths and weaknesses of Singer's book are, in some measure, the strengths and weaknesses of Canadian communications research itself. It is good that, at least within the traditions of this research, he has been able to provide us with an anthology of enhanced substantial academic quality.