



COMPARING THE EARLY AND LATE MCLUHAN TO INNIS'S POLITICAL DISCOURSE

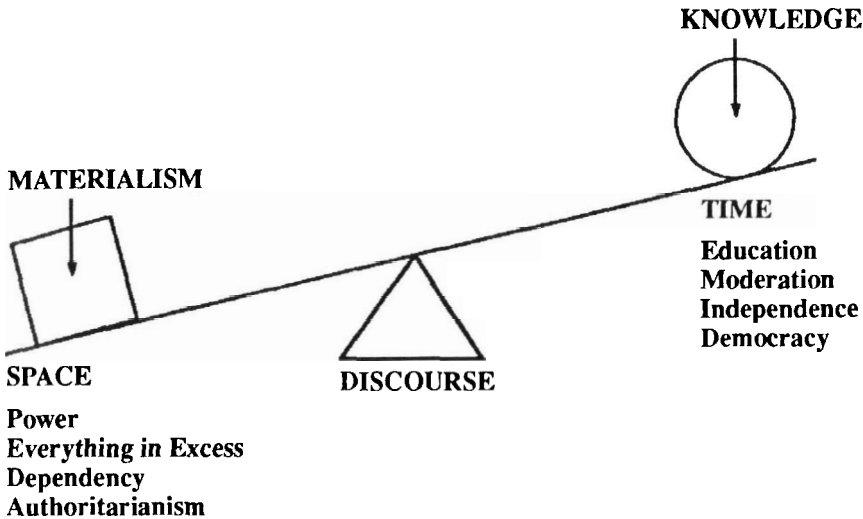
By James P. Winter and Irving Goldman
University of Windsor

Marshall McLuhan frequently is referred to, and evaluated as, a disciple of Harold Innis. Certainly McLuhan and Innis were involved in a mutual exchange of ideas in the late 1940s and up until the latter's death in 1952. They put each other's works on their students' reading lists. But while McLuhan did rely extensively on Innis's work, there are two important caveats to be drawn as we set about our own comparison to add to the growing literature. First, there were many other influences on McLuhan besides Innis, including Wyndham Lewis, James Joyce, Edmund Carpenter, E.A. Havelock, etc. As such, it would be wise not to overstress the role of Innis in McLuhan's thought generally. Secondly, one would be remiss in inferring that McLuhan may be evaluated simply in terms of whether, or how well, he popularized some aspect of Innis's thought. There is much more to McLuhan than this, for as his student and critic has noted, McLuhan is a fundamental Twentieth Century writer who has contributed "to our understanding of communication, culture and technology in the contemporary world." (Theall, 1988:97).

With these qualifications at the outset, we intend to elaborate crucial ideas of Innis, comparing and contrasting those of McLuhan. This in itself is a major undertaking, owing to the major controversies swirling around just what it is that these two men were talking about. To begin with Innis, there are numerous levels or dimensions from which his writings may be approached. Neall (1972:84) for example, posits a six-dimensional concept of social action arising out of Innis's work. Following Hennessy (1989), we would suggest that there are at least four levels of thought in Innis, which may be regarded as dialectics associated with various disciplines, the development of which Innis would no doubt lament!

The dialectics, with their disciplinary followings and dualist opposites or "contraries" are as follows: Political (Power/Knowledge), Philosophical (Freedom/Constraint), Historical (Space/Time), and Economical (Hinterland/Metropolis). While there is overlap and these "readings" of Innis are by no means mutually exclusive, there is a tendency in the literature on Innis for authors to write from one or the other of these perspectives. For example, while Watkins (1977) and Drache (1982) view Innis from the economics perspective, Wernick (1986) focuses somewhat on the historical, while Armour and Trott (1981) take a philosophical view. For our part, in agreement with Watson (1977), Heyer (1981) and others, we choose to emphasize the political dialectic, represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1
The Political Dialectic in Innis



(Adapted from Hennessy, 1989)

Innis painstakingly explored the development of the press in North America, observing that it had failed dismally in its role as the fourth estate, or watchdog for the public interest. (Innis, 1949:31) He argued that the mass circulation commercial press which developed in this century has a history of appealing to ever-lower levels of literacy, via sensationalism and triviality. The objective has been the commoditization of news in a spiralling effort to appeal to advertisers. In the process journalism moved from "a profession to a branch of commerce." (Innis, 1949:30).

As had Lippmann (1922), Innis saw the problem in terms of the ramifications for public discourse. Specialization and fragmentation in the newspaper industry, with unconnected masses of information, facts or trivia, strengthened the position of autocratic forms of government leading to the rise of dictators such as Hitler and Mussolini. It also has led to longer lives for administrators in Western countries such as FDR (Reagan, Trudeau, Thatcher??) and a tendency toward elections with overwhelming majorities (today's examples include Mulroney, 1984, Peterson, 1987) owing to the volatility of the electorate. No better example of this volatility in the current context could be provided than the fall 1988 federal election.

So while the position of the political and economic elite has been strengthened by this process, the individual has been weakened by the consequent monopoly of knowledge. As a means of balancing this development, then, Innis turned to the role of universities and academics. Here he discovered that the educational system is the equivalent of yesterday's newspaper. Whereas the ideal academic role is to foment knowledge and the long-term view in order to balance the short-term perspective of business and politics, we too have been subordinated into the power structure. Innis abhorred the development of research institutes, tying the ideally neutral ground of academia ever closer to government and business. He objected to professors functioning as consultants to government and industry, and acting as social engineers. "We need a study of the professor as sandwich man—perhaps a doctoral thesis," he once caustically remarked (Innis, 1946:74). Throughout his writings, and for example in "The Tyranny of Opinion and Learning," in 1946, Innis most of all objected to the practical nature of education, compared with the broader liberal arts approach; to the reductionism, and specialization in universities. Were Innis alive today, he would no doubt object to other developments which have made kin of the newspaper and education industries: evening papers paralleled by extension courses; Sunday papers by weekend degrees in Social Work and Law, for example: special sections and supplements by popular courses on the mystery-supernatural; ever-increasing human interest, trivia and tabloids by semester or half-year courses.

From the Innisian perspective this fundamentally undermines our ability to balance the power structure's monopoly on knowledge, by cultivating knowledge through discourse. This led, in part, to Innis's bias for traditional, oral cultures, with their more egalitarian form of discourse and greater resistance to such monopolization (Carey, 1981:87). In literate (and 'postliterate') cultures, with the abdication of the press's role owing to its corporate sell-out, the task of enhancing public discourse and knowledge devolves onto academia.

As with Innis, there are many aspects to McLuhan's work, which, without categorizing them as we have done with Innis, we might suggest range from that of poet, artist, clown, to (although he strenuously denied it) communication theorist, concerned with understanding mass society through the media. But as a

self-proclaimed disciple of Innis, where does McLuhan fit into the Innisian Political Dialectic outlined thus far? Perhaps we can begin this comparison by noting that if the specific crux of Innis's work is, as we have identified it, with the ramifications of discourse for democracy, or to put it another way, the ability of the individual to remain unmanipulated and to 'cope' in society, then there are obvious parallels with McLuhan. As Theall (1971:56) notes, according to McLuhan the central purpose of his work is to indicate how we can achieve control through understanding. Theall says that, at least in *The Mechanical Bride*, McLuhan's point of view is "one of a Jeffersonian individualism," fostered by freedom which can only result from genuine freedom of choice, which itself results from awareness, consciousness, and intellectual involvement in how media are working on the individual. While he would disagree with the implied technological determinacy, Innis would concur with the problem faced at the level of the individual, and it is this that he hoped education would help to resolve. With respect to the Power/Knowledge Dialectic in Innis, at the outset we may say that McLuhan demonstrated a strong concern for the future of public discourse, and the role of both the power elite and the educational system in its future. Having said that, it is also apparent that McLuhan was extremely conflicted on these matters: or, at the very least, there was both an "early" and a "late" McLuhan, even if as Watson (1977) and others have argued, there was only one Innis! The irony is compounded here by McLuhan, who did think there was an early and a late Innis, and who wrote: "The later Innis had no position."

In 1953, the same year he was writing the above comment, McLuhan also wrote to his former student and disciple Walter Ong, summing up the "matters" of the recently published *Mechanical Bride*, for which Ong had written a favourable book review. McLuhan said *The Bride* pertained to "...universal emotional and intellectual illiteracy" (Molinaro et al., 1987:234). But McLuhan was being modest with regard to a book which is still today an insightful, telling if popular critique of print media and advertising. In this first book, published in 1951, McLuhan made explicit what was implicit in much of Innis's work, without providing the historical context or theoretical framework. It consisted of pages of ads, with McLuhan's biting commentaries opposite, commentaries in which he sketchily but effectively outlined a crassly commercial press with Barnum's view of the public as suckers. Overdoing the hyperbole, McLuhan painted a picture of power and money-hungry media corporations such as the "Ballet Luce" which engendered "mass hypnosis" in "mindless, helpless, entranced" audiences. Corporate America, with the help of marketing "Galluputians" or "Pollster-geists" calculated ways to ensnare and enslave the public in the consumer rat race. "Let the people have freedom, and let others have the power. Especially the power to tell them that they are free and that they are consumed with the spirit of rivalry and success" (McLuhan, 1951:113). Applying Innis's arguments at the individual level, McLuhan argued that the propaganda of the unofficial education program of corporate

America had serious ramifications for human integrity, freedom, and individualism. What's more, he discussed the "psychological misery" of insecurity associated with the endless consumerism, in an (albeit decontextualized, ahistorical) way which antedated writers such as Fromm (1955) and Lasch (1979;1984). Furthermore, in striking contrast to his later works, McLuhan pessimistically portrayed the public, products of this consumer society, as "taking on the rigidity of machines," "frozen into helpless, soul-less robots," with "mechanical ways" and in "trance-like" states (McLuhan,1951:97-102).

Here we see an early McLuhan who, like Innis, saw and feared the developing monopoly of knowledge, even if he merely described its effects and barely alluded to its structure. For, as Theall (1971:204) notes, McLuhan's is a "bankrupt sociology" lacking the theoretical synthesis of a Marx, Weber, Mannheim, or Innis Still, at this point apparently he at least saw its effects and identified a corporate culprit. In *The Bride* man's sense of discrimination is reduced by virtue of business, media and advertising agencies tampering "with his intellectual and sensory life" (Theall, 1971:53). By the time of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, published in 1962, the later McLuhan had emerged, with quite a startling shift in perspective, and one which was to stay with him throughout the rest of his life.

In contrast to the corporate manipulators who were behind the intellectual tampering with the dire consequences outlined in *The Bride*, by the publication of *The Galaxy* the culprit had shifted to the faceless determinism of "technology." In Theall's words, "What produced Gutenberg Man, though, is not the operation of a specific environment and milieu, but the introduction at one point in history of one technical device" (Theall, 1971:54). Printing technology was to blame, just as electronic technology was soon to become McLuhan's panacea. Somewhere in that 11-year span from 1951 to 1962, Marshall McLuhan became a technological determinist.

Vestiges of this early critical perspective remained with McLuhan throughout the later years, but seemingly it received little emphasis either from the man himself or from the media which brought him fame. For example, in a letter to then-Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau in 1974, he returned to a theme from *The Bride*, now seemingly compounded by electronic media:

Is it too late to point to our universal victimization by media in which private identity has been abolished? For trendy people, the destruction of private identity by instant information involvement is a mandate to attack all forms of private life which remain. There are many people for whom 'thinking' necessarily means identifying with existing trends (Molinaro et al., 1987:503).

Turning to the knowledge component in the Innisian political dialectic, we see that once again, the early McLuhan provides a reasonable, if not good fit for

the model. In *The Bride*, McLuhan compares official and unofficial programmes of public instruction, the former being the formal educational system and the latter being the one carried on by commerce through the media. The latter, he said, "...has mainly neutralized the much smaller program of official education with its much smaller budget and much less well-paid brainpower." (McLuhan, 1951:43). Thus, to McLuhan, billions of tax dollars were going towards the support of what Innis would term a monopoly of knowledge on the part of the power structure; one which was inevitable given the low ebb of discourse. This is but one example of many in *The Bride* which belittled the role of higher education. While Innis appears to have remained reservedly optimistic about that role, McLuhan already had consigned it to the same wasteland occupied by the press. Thus, he could remark that, "Both anguish and starvation of mind are the normal condition of those engaged on the assembly lines of Harvard graduate study..." (McLuhan, 1951:43).

Theall (1971:97) divides education into two approaches or styles, the Ciceronian and Senecan, which he says is in keeping with McLuhan's views. The Ciceronian, humanist or doctus orator is the style of the learned encyclopaedist, skilled in the arts of persuasion and rhetoric. The Senecan scholastics, on the other hand, are the logicians and dialecticians. According to Theall, McLuhan's strategy is, or was, the defense of humanism. Thus, in a 1945 article in the *Sewanee Review*, McLuhan analyzed the North/South conflict in the U.S. as "...merely another stage in the educational conflict between humanist and scholastic, ancient and modern" (Theall, 1971:98). The South produced gentlemen interested in politics, law, and the arts of expression, while the North produced technologists and financiers dedicated to specialism.

This McLuhan perspective published in 1945 is still readily apparent in *The Bride*, six years later. Discussing an advertisement for *The Art of Plain Talk*, a book by Rudolph Flesch which purported to teach you how to be eloquent in 10 easy lessons, McLuhan snorted at this short cut, this education made easy.

...the Greek Sophists had taught how to make men wise and powerful by making them eloquent...(through) an encyclopedic program of studies...This curiously unified and extensive program remained the basis of classical education until 1850. And it was only as the professors adopted the specialized bent of our times that they lost their bearings and influence. Today it is not the classroom nor the classics which are the repositories of models of eloquence, but the ad agencies (McLuhan, 1951:42).

Yet again, for McLuhan, something happened on the way to the sixties. May we be allowed to suggest that consulting for IBM, AT&T, and so forth contributed to the shift in McLuhan's view of the power structure in society, which may in part explain the differences outlined above between *The Bride* and *The Galaxy*. This view is supported by Theall (1971:93) who notes that "In *The Galaxy*, McLuhan

very rapidly adopts a safe position with respect to the corporate power of the contemporary world...part of it is a result of his relation to the powers of the managerial world." In any event, the circumstantial evidence would appear stronger for our suggested explanation of differences between the early and late McLuhan on the education dimension: that is, consulting for the National Association of Education Broadcasters. In 1959-60, McLuhan was commissioned by the NAEB in the U.S. to provide an approach and a syllabus for teaching the nature and effects of the media in secondary schools. The report for the NAEB was the first draft of *Understanding Media* (Molinaro et al., 1987:255). Of course, McLuhan already may have changed his views on the education system, but in any case it made little sense for the NAEB to hire someone with the views McLuhan expressed about education in *The Bride*, unless those views had changed.

For the later McLuhan, the "old" educational methods still presented problems: the fragmentation and isolationism of literacy, for example. But now, the new electronic media had "swallowed" the older world of mechanization, and it was up to the educators not to treat them simply as audio-visual aids, but as "new languages" to be taught to the youth. Similarly, educators must "...compare the same play or novel or poem or news story as it's changed artistically in passing into the movie form, the stage, the radio, and TV" (McLuhan, 1969:133). Thus, the same individual who earlier had lamented that: "...education as a status escalator or mobility agent is also a very crude device for insuring that its products will often be mentally narrow to the point of helplessness" (McLuhan, 1951:126), could now blithely proclaim that in the age of classrooms without walls, the post-literacy electronic media age, "...no matter how many walls have fallen, the citadel of individual consciousness has not fallen nor is it likely to fall. For it is not accessible to the mass media." (McLuhan, 1969:135). The two statements are irreconcilable, and realizing this, McLuhan simply stated that all of the major points of *The Bride* had been made irrelevant by television (Theall, 1971:55). In so doing, he endorsed the concept of the early and late McLuhan, as well as publicly and formally bidding adieu to his Innisian ties. The later McLuhan, the one most of us know, from *The Galaxy* through *Understanding Media* onward, bears little relation to Innis other than a common perception of the negative impact of literacy and the printing press, and a common penchant for traditional oral cultures. Certainly, on the electronic media, which form the bulk of McLuhan's work, their perspectives are totally at odds. But the early McLuhan, who was writing at the time Innis was still alive, had a great deal more in common with his mentor.

Of course, with all of the complexities and inconsistencies of McLuhan, some of his writings just don't fit neatly into the model we've elaborated. He wrote in *War and Peace in the Global Village*, for example, that "The corporate word from the old men from Iron Mountain is that war is an inseparable feature of the economic establishment" (McLuhan, 1968:118). And in *Counter blast*, he said

"...never before was education so much a part of commerce and politics" (McLuhan, 1969:134). Both of these statements belong to the early rather than the later McLuhan. Part of the explanation has been indicated above, where we said differences between the early and later McLuhan may be explained to a minor extent by a change in emphasis, by McLuhan and the media which popularized him. Another explanation may be provided by his overall optimism, whatever its roots, the optimism of his secular theology of electronic technology. McLuhan remained in part, critical, and he certainly saw himself as being so. As such, he himself undercuts this latter explanation. Writing to Malcolm Muggeridge in 1974, he said:

Now and then I get comments from acquaintances who seem to be under the impression that you see me as an enthusiastic promoter and exponent of electric technology who is dissolving the values of Gutenberg culture. This is very far from being the case, and all of my life has been devoted to teaching and cultivating literary values...I begin to understand why I am mistaken for an exponent of the things I abominate (Molinaro et al., 1987:507).

If we take this McLuhanism to heart we shall be driven right back to our starting point: a circular venture which should please both McLuhan and Innis.

REFERENCES

- Armour, Leslie, and Elizabeth Trott. (1981) *The Faces of Reason: An Essay on Philosophy and Culture in English Canada, 1850-1950*. Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press.
- Carey, James W. (1981) "Culture, Geography, and Communications: The Work of Harold Innis in an American Context." In *Culture, Communication, and Dependency: The Tradition of H.A. Innis*. Ed. W. Melody, L. Salter, and P. Heyer. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, pp. 73-92.
- Fromm, Erich. (1955) *The Sane Society*. Toronto: Random House.
- Hennessy, Donna. (1989) "A Comparative Analysis of Two Radical Thinkers: Harold Adams Innis and C. Wright Mills." Unpublished M. A. Thesis, University of Windsor.
- Heyer, Paul. (1981) "Innis and the History of Communication: Antecedents, Parallels, and Unsuspected Biases." In *Culture, Communication and Dependency: The Tradition of H.A. Innis*. Ed. W. Melody, L. Salter, and P. Heyer. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, pp. 247-260.
- Innis, H.A. (1946) *Political Economy in the Modern State*. Toronto: Ryerson Press.

- _____. (1949) London: *Oxford University Press*.
- _____. (1950) *Empire and Communications*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- _____. (1951) *The Bias of Communication*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Lasch, Christopher. (1979) *The Culture of Narcissism*. N.Y. Warner.
- _____. (1984) *The Minimal Self*. Don Mills: Stoddart.
- Lippmann, Walter. (1922) *Public Opinion*. N.Y. MacMillan.
- McLuhan, H.M. (1951) *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*. N.Y. Vanguard Press.
- _____. (1962) *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- _____. (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill.
- _____ and Quentin Fiore, (1968) *War and Peace in the Global Village*. Toronto: McGraw Hill.
- _____. (1969) *Counter blast*. London: Rapp and Whiting Ltd.
- Molinaro, Matie, Corinne McLuhan and William Toye. (1987) *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*. Toronto: Oxford University Press.
- Neall, Robin. (1972) *A New Theory of Value*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Theall, Donald. (1971) *The Medium is the Rear View Mirror: Understanding McLuhan*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- _____. (1988) "Messages in McLuhan's Letters: The Communicator as Correspondent." *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 13:3,4 Fall, pp. 86-98.
- Watkins, Mel. (1977) "The Staple Theory Revisited." *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 12:5, Winter, pp. 83-95.
- Watson, John. (1977) "Harold Innis and Classical Scholarship." *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 12:5, Winter, pp. 45-61.
- Wernick, Andrew. (1986) "The Post-Innisian Significance of Innis." *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 10:1-2, pp. 128-150.