



Confessions of a Television Addict: A Critical Review

The Making of the Canadian Media
by Paul Rutherford
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“The true is thus the Bacchanalean revel in which no member is not drunk; yet because each member collapses as soon as he drops out the revel is just as much transparent and simple repose.”

— Hegel

One might begin to wonder whether Hegel’s comment did not foretell a new research methodology. Leiss has recently (and whimsically) drawn the attention of social theory to the possibility of an “ontology of stoned concepts”, and now Rutherford seems to be expanding this line of enquiry into an ethnomethodology of media addiction. Or at least we might surmise as we read Rutherford’s introduction to *The Making of the Canadian Media* in which he candidly discloses that his motivation for this book is really “a personal justification of my addiction” to the modern communication media. He goes on to outline his condition:

“I have long been a media addict, one of those happy consumers of everything from pop fiction and rock music to CBC newscasts and the Sunday New York Times. Some years back, I decided to delve into the origins of my addiction, or to put that query into more scholarly terms, to investigate the historical significance of communications in Canada.”

A few may be startled by this link between personal addiction and historical analysis. Investigating personal addiction, which DeQuincy made acceptable as a literary genre, has not yet become the recognized grounding for objective historical research—at least as far as I am aware. As they say, alcoholics, are not always the best of bartenders. I assume that many historians would feel that the fascination with one’s

subject matter must be tempered with a critical appreciation of available information. Otherwise, as is the case with most addictions, enthusiasm overcomes reason to the point where the writer, like the addict is a slave of his own predispositions; the result is that he is not in a position to evaluate and draw conclusions about his particular subject. In Rutherford's case, where he is chattily regaling with anecdotes about media-makers I have no problem with the basis of this enquiry; but when he draws conclusions about the significance of the media in Canadian society, and the nature of its role, I for one begin to get nervous.

Historians generally strive to base their conclusions on more than just an impression of historical events; usually it is to that unique form of historical empiricism to which they turn in order to transform their fascination with a subject matter into a duly constituted historical account. Like many researchers, Rutherford claims that his discussion and conclusions in this book based upon the "facts of history and the musings of social scientists". But as he goes on to admit these facts of history are not assembled from some much needed systematic perusal of primary sources, namely the media outpourings of the last two hundred years. Nor is there a careful appraisal of the accounts and operations of the various media, no timebased charts depicting the percentage of GNP spent on advertising, no detailed tracings of ownerships and affiliations of various media, no assessment of foreign investment and control. The historical traditions of Innis are not emulated here, and there is no new data generated here from which to derive the evaluations which Rutherford makes about the 'making of the media'. The evidence which he does offer is mainly anecdotal. As he points out his facts of history are gleaned from the accounts of those people that made the media:

"most of the arguments rest upon a reading of the enormous wealth of reminiscences, accounts, criticism, reports and monographs pertinent to the development of the media."

The reminiscences are chiefly of those who owned or worked in the media. The accounts and criticisms are of the journalists that decided to write about their jobs and friends, and of the other biographers disguised as historians. In my reckoning, it is these sources amongst the book's bibliography which give shape and substance to Rutherford's account. Like so many of media documentaries themselves, the personalized leader-centred perspective on social change is reflected here. The account is reminiscent of a TV chat show in which important personages from the media constantly gossip about their own doings. Little wonder that this account ends up as an encouraging and friendly pat on the media's back.

Nor does this book comprise a useful survey of the media's account of various historical events. Although extremely tedious, such a piece

of research would have been useful to a wide variety of people interested in the history of communication. One could relish thumbing through to the section on the press coverage and editorial debates about confederation, conscription, the economic alternatives of the thirties, or the radio coverage of the last war. More importantly, to conclude that the marketplace for media have enhanced the vigour, scope and divergent expression of viewpoints in society *such data is requisite*. Yet what the media made of various issues Rutherford has not submitted to careful scrutiny.

As for the musings of social scientists, Rutherford has wasted very little ink on the discussion of the various historical academic debates, or the recurring issues that have tended to be the concerns of social scientific observers of the media. His reason is a simple and self-confessed distrust of theory:

“the book does not attempt to apply to the history of the media any theory or model concocted by a great thinker. Historians are notorious for their suspicion of grand theories...it is part of their charm in an academic world afflicted by hardening of the mind.”

Not being a member of this charmed circle of historians, it came as a minor shock to discover that the *modus operandi* of historical research was to conscientiously avoid the ideas of great minds. Certainly the indiscreet application of grand theories to the conceptualization of the development and role of media is a confusing and sometimes distracting activity. But to ignore the writings of such notable historians of the media like Raymond Williams, Leo Bogart, and Fred Silbert to name a few, is singularly unsatisfying. I prefer the social scientific mode of discourse in which one identifies important issues in the literature and then assesses their applicability in the light of data. And if the Canadian situation is different from the British and American press, then it would be extremely useful to know in which aspects this is so. For as Rutherford readily admits, Canadians have never been great innovators with the media; most of the changes in technology, economics, form and content of the media have been adapted from foreign models.

By way of consequence, issues like the massification of culture, violence in the media, commercialization effects, cultural domination, and the changing patterns of literacy only peripherally inform the discussion in this book. Possibly these debates might have been an unnecessary burden to this type of historical account. What seems more problematic, however, especially given the nature of his argument about the success of the commercial media, is the failure to examine the institutional settings in which the media have developed. There is little attention paid to assessing Canada's early flirtation with public broadcasting, the role of the CBC during the war, the development of educational channels (provincial) as alternatives to

commercial broadcasting system, or any other attempts to *alternative institutional arrangements* for the media. To Rutherford, the total commercialization of the communication industry seems so inevitably and ultimately beneficial that such comparisons and experimentation are fatuous. A little attention to the changing cultural and institutional environment in which the media have operated would have been of major assistance to this historical account.

Indeed, one might have more easily overlooked enthusiasm for the media in this historical account of its development if, as the editor of the series declaims in his introduction to the book it only reflects that "the fellow is a fan and clearly enjoying himself." Enthusiasm for a subject matter is always welcome in any academic study. Moreover, too much media analysis to date has been marred by the elitist *distinctions between high and low cultural form. More often than not* it is snobbish disdain which is the only sentiment reserved for the artifacts of popular expression, without any recognition of their import in the historical development of ideas. Recent commentators have begun to reverse this trend and have undertaken the examination of all aspects of popular culture and given them their due place in social history. One can be thankful that the sociology of knowledge no longer dwells only upon the dissemination of the ideas of great philosophers. A history of the media is an important area of investigation to such researchers.

But Rutherford's enthusiasm for the media flows from a deeper source. His fascination with the media seems to be justified mainly by his basic belief that they stand, as he says, "on the side of the angels". And the Angels of course line up with the diagnosis of liberal market cosmology. His enthusiasm for the media is inextricable from his judgement that the marketplace is the best guarantee of free expression in contemporary society. This basic evaluation underscores the whole of this account of the development of the media in Canada and leads to the inevitable conclusions that in spite of admitted faults "the maintenance and present vigour of the open society owes much to the contribution of the Canadian media". More specifically, Rutherford draws out the implications of the performance of the media for the Canadian political economy:

"being Canadian means living within limitations imposed by our economy and by historical relationships of dependency. The mass media do not remove these limitations...but they make Canada as "open" a society as can be expected".

Such comments clearly betray the standpoint from which Rutherford makes his observations. Firstly he expects us to accept those limitations placidly and without questions; the horizon of our expectation must be narrowly confined in appreciation for what is

offered. But more importantly, he never seriously poses the question about what role the media play as part of the process which imposes those limitations upon us. This is the most serious fault of this book. Without the aid of rudimentary communication theory he doesn't even ask the question for whom this great Canadian debating society is open, for what purposes and to what effect. For him, the illusion of free speech, the panoply of entertainments, and the informed rational discourse that the media have supposedly helped to propagate are meant to be sufficient compensation for the cultural domination and economic exploitation that the media also help to perpetuate. He even ends his book with the following ominous warning "Enjoy the present; it can't, as the favoured cliché says, last forever". A contentious conclusion indeed, and one which when made deserves considerable supporting evidence.

This book unfortunately, does not present such evidence. It does however iterate the complete system of inferences that provides the justification of the liberal theory of the media. It is useful to briefly review this justificatory structure as abstracted from this book. The final judgement of course is similar to the Irving Group monopoly case: economic control is not ideological and therefore the market mechanism provides the best assurance of a free press. Such an argument does not deny the domination of the media by commercial interests, the use of the media to stimulate high intensity consumerism or escapes from the realities of work. It does not deny the concentration of media ownerships, or the impact of the media in the dissemination of political and other ideas, myths, stereotypes. Even the Davey committee recognized these facts of history. Rather, it argues that it is precisely these factors which must be credited for the "benefits of the vast cornucopia of delights our media dispense".

This evaluative inversion is accomplished not only by seeing the media as integral to the dispensation of other social benefits, but more specifically as the major means by which the 'open society' is achieved. Rutherford characterizes this society as pertaining strictly to the ideological realm:

"a land wherein reason, ideas, and debate amongst the general citizenry play an essential part in the public arena and in private life".

Is this Canada? Can we agree with Rutherford that in spite of the increasing concentrations of economic control, the systematic reduction of alternative voices, the bureaucratization and deregionalization of the public media, that the media have promoted this open social discourse? For it is precisely to the increasing autonomy from direct political control which is afforded by the economic success established by the market basis of the media to which he points for the origins of this open dialogue:

"The death of radicalism was linked to the place of the

mass press within the complex of Canada's social institutions. Over the years, the much touted independence of the press began to acquire some substance. The economics of daily journalism lessened the newspapers' reliance upon the monies and influence of outsiders and worked against the survival of the more common organ. Publishers came to recognize their profits rested more upon the public's patronage than anything else".

He continues this argument by explaining the dynamics of this mechanism in more detail. With the increasing concentration of the media "their resources in talent and money enable them to respond swiftly to market conditions. Hence their riches". And so, as the media become a successful economic force they are supposedly freed from political control which previously used the press as an 'organ' of its will. As his researchers have informed him, in the bygone days the press was partisan. Editors openly and consciously tried to influence readers on political and economic issues. Commentary in the press was accepted as slanted towards some particular interest. But as the media became directly tied to commercial interests there was a perceived "decline in the partisan politics in the press" and a much celebrated 'triumph of the multi-media'. The new media however, are more benign masters than their political predecessors:

"The masters of the press, radio and television do constitute a media elite. They are not a conspiracy against the public good however. Indeed, their reign has contributed to marked improvement in the performance of the media",

The reason given is that they have "not evinced a concentrated will to power, at least nothing comparable to the urges that drove the paper tyrants of bygone days". Apparently this is so because their objectives are economic and regulated by market forces, rather than political. Their sins therefore, are ones of "ommission and not of commission".

In other words, the triumph of the multi-media occurs because the information marketplace dominates in the battle to control ideology. Without contesting this observation concerning the media's transformation of ideological processes, one may still remain unconvinced of the evaluation of it that Rutherford offers, and the reasoning he gives. At every election we are reminded of the changing nature of the PR circus that demarks the influence of the media on politics; but on what grounds are we to conclude this is a net benefit for Canadian society. Such conclusions are not in accord with the judgments of most recent researchers into media content, organizational policy, and agenda setting. If Rutherford's intention was to make a case for the media, then he should have done so explicitly and not disguised this work as a history of the media.

In this respect, I can offer here one very cynical reading of this book, which in an ironic way will make sense to students of communication. One of the main effects postulated by mass media researchers of the late forties was the 'narcotizing dysfunction'; too much media consumption they felt might lead to mass numbing of the critical faculties and an acceptance of the given order. If religion was the opiate of the nineteenth century masses then, the media may be the somnamelazene of the twentieth. In this sense, these confessions of a television addict might be seen as the product of this psycho-technic infusion—as an effect of this media addiction. Read in this way the ethnomethodology of addiction helps to provide some insight into the individual ideological influences of prolonged exposure to the media; its liberal inference structure is the product of the media's own psychologic. Indeed, the contented liberalism that permeates this celebration of the mass media's history, its leader centred portrayal of social events, its television documentary anecdotalism, and ultimately its confidence in the redeeming features and justification for the market based role of the media perfectly accord with the view that the conclusions of this book reflect this media addiction, more than they derive from serious historical analysis.