
CHAPTER 6

**Metahistory, Mythology, and
the Media: The American
Thought of Harold Innis
and Marshall McLuhan**

For the most radical and elaborate American media theory, one must look to the work of two Canadians, Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan. They represent two wings of a body of speculation that locates the formal characteristics of communications media as the prime mover behind the historical process, social organizations, and changing sensory awareness. Innis's work on communication began at least in part as a conscious Canadian attack on the burgeoning American cultural and economic hegemony in the postwar world. This critical perspective was prominent in the works of the early McLuhan as well, although his negative appraisal of American civilization had somewhat different roots from that of Innis. As Canadians, both men were less constrained by the behavioral tradition of communication studies dominant in the United States. Innis, an economic historian, and McLuhan, a literary critic, came to communication studies late in their careers, and they brought with them fundamentally new ways of analyzing media.

Throughout their work the brute and seemingly irreversible fact of American power, particularly American technological power, served as a key referent. In the works of Innis and the early McLuhan, American media and American society loom as spectral threats to Canadian culture; in the mature works of McLuhan, they are exalted. Their writings reveal close affinities with several

American intellectual traditions. Strongly influenced by Thorstein Veblen's dichotomy of industry and business, Innis's forays into media theory near the end of his life may be viewed in part as an attempt to construct an intellectual bridge between technology and the price system.

McLuhan's later works and his enormous popular vogue remind us of the continuing powerful attraction of the "rhetoric of the technological sublime," as Leo Marx has phrased it. Both Innis and McLuhan espoused varieties of technological determinism strongly reminiscent of the work of Charles Horton Cooley and Robert Park. McLuhan's stress on media as the basis for organic unity recalls not only Cooley but also the popular excitement surrounding each new development in communications technology. Whereas so much of American social thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has focused on the upheavals wrought by extraordinary advances in American material production, Innis and McLuhan sought tools in media studies for addressing the concurrent problems of consumption, leisure, and the industrialization of the mind.

Innis's work in communication remains largely unknown, except through his influence on McLuhan, and McLuhan's adaptation of Innis was a highly selective and distorted one. Though McLuhan was a self-proclaimed disciple of Innis, a vigorous and lonely voice against American media imperialism, his enduring legacy may well be his role in legitimizing the status quo of American communications industries and their advertisers. Innis's excursions into media theory were tentative and incomplete, yet full of rich suggestions for future research and analysis. McLuhan, despite protestations that he merely made "probes," fashioned a more closed and static theory of media than is generally realized.

The thought of both men needs to be evaluated historically, because it emerged from and was shaped by shifting intellectual, political, and moral perspectives. In McLuhan's case, however, it is somewhat difficult to separate his ideas from the historical phenomenon of his persona. As the most advanced communication theorists, both Innis and McLuhan must be assessed historically, but they must also be judged on the continuing relevance of their contributions to the understanding of present and future media.

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On initial viewing, the career of Harold Adams Innis appears to encompass the work of two very different thinkers. The first Innis was a renowned economic historian and economic theorist, a central

figure in the construction of a distinct Canadian political economy between the two world wars. This Innis combined prodigious research in primary materials, a thorough firsthand knowledge of Canadian geography, and imaginative synthesizing to produce a unified approach to Canadian history: the so-called staples thesis of economic growth. By contrast, the later Innis immersed himself in the history and political economy of communication from the ancient world through the present. His flights of speculation, as much philosophical as historical, required a full-scale redirection of thinking into uncharted territories. The later Innis is of primary concern here, but it is necessary to trace at least the outlines of his early work because several themes unite the economic and communications studies.

Born in 1894 in rural southern Ontario, Innis spent his early years on the small farm of his strict Baptist parents. Hoping that he would enter the ministry, his family scraped together money for schooling; young Innis not only refused to study for the ministry, but refused baptism as well. Nonetheless, throughout his life he retained the strong sense of individualism in matters of conscience and the deep belief in separation of church and state inculcated by his pious parents. He was hungry for education; at fourteen he began to commute twenty miles each way to attend the nearest collegiate institute. In 1912 he entered McMaster University in Toronto. For a time he also taught in remote prairie public schools in Manitoba, an educational pioneer getting a firsthand look at the Canadian West. After completing his B.A. degree in 1916, Innis immediately enlisted in the Canadian army and shipped out to the French front. He was badly wounded shortly thereafter and returned to Canada. He took his M.A. in economics at McMaster in 1918 and decided to plunge ahead for the doctorate at the University of Chicago. He completed his Ph.D. in 1920, writing a dissertation on the history of the Canadian Pacific Railway.¹

At Chicago, Innis first encountered in absentia one of the key intellectual influences of his life: Thorstein Veblen. Although Veblen had left Chicago some years earlier, his towering presence lingered among the younger faculty. Innis was part of that younger generation of students profoundly moved by Veblen's iconoclastic attacks on the received doctrines of neoclassical economics. Innis's war experience left him something of an angry young man, dissatisfied with university life; it also intensified his Canadian nationalism and a belief that standard economics were thoroughly inadequate for explaining the Canadian situation. His intense involvement

with a Veblen study group at Chicago exposed him to the full range of Veblen's exciting and heretical works.²

Veblen's assault on neoclassical economics challenged the notion that economic laws were universal: timeless and true for all places. He accused the neoclassical thinkers of constructing a mere "taxonomy" of economic concepts and never questioning the moral and political implications behind the current distribution of wealth. Veblen objected to the orthodox view that the economic situation possessed an intrinsic tendency toward "normal equilibrium" and was guided by the operation of the market place as rational coordinator of economic agents. For their psychology of human motivation, the neoclassicists relied on a simplistic "hedonist calculus" of rationalism: the assumption that men always act rationally to avoid pain and achieve happiness. In short, they took for granted the very things that Veblen thought needed to be explained.

Veblen sought to recast economics as an "evolutionary science" concerned with tracing the complex development of human institutions and habits over time. He paid particular attention to the stages of technological growth, which derived ultimately from the "instinct of workmanship." In Veblen's schema, advances in technology, from handicrafts through machine industry, produced more goods for the subsistence and comfort of men. The modern machine process operated under a systematic, disciplined, and reasoned procedure; it enforced these habits among those who worked with machines. Its parts were standardized and interdependent, adding up to an integrated and efficient method of production. But it was operated by businessmen whose aim was simply to make a profit measured in terms of prices. Toward that end, businessmen encouraged habits opposed to the rational workings of industrial production—conspicuous consumption, speculation, wasteful competition. The resulting contradictions precipitated severe depressions and kept the level of production far below its capacity in order to maximize profits.³

The young Innis was inspired by Veblen's departure from neoclassical orthodoxy and the alternative approaches he suggested. In 1929, the year of Veblen's death, Innis published an article in which he reviewed Veblen's work and suggested possible applications of his theories. Innis was strongly attracted to the scientific side of Veblen, the Veblen who "insisted upon the existence of laws of growth and decay of institutions and associations. . . . Veblen has waged a constructive warfare of emancipation against the tendency toward standardized static economics which becomes so dangerous

on a continent with ever increasing numbers of students clamoring for textbooks on final economic theory."

At the center of Veblen's work Innis saw an elaborate argument documenting the impact of machine industry and the industrial revolution. He argued that Veblen's concern sprang from the post-Civil War environment in which the terrific efficiency of American machine industry gave rise to the problems of overproduction and conspicuous consumption. Veblen himself had "lived through one of the economic storms of new countries." A generation later, Canada endured the throes of an economic storm similar to that of Veblen's post-Civil War Middle West.

The Canadian Innis viewed with dismay the conflict between the inert economics of a long and highly industrialized country such as England and the needs of the recently industrialized nations. The key for understanding the dynamics of economic growth and the "wealth of nations" lay in analyzing the application of changing technologies to abundant resources. This was especially true for frontier areas such as Canada, which were relatively free from the constraints of obsolescent institutions. Specific economic histories of these nations had to be written and integrated with a dynamic economic theory. Innis spent the better part of his early career framing a Canadian economic history and growth theory along these Veblenian lines.⁴

When he began to teach at the University of Toronto in 1920, Innis found it necessary to start virtually from scratch in courses on Canadian economics and economic history. Over the next fifteen years he formulated his own approach to these subjects. The "staples thesis" showed how the modern Canadian nation had descended directly from colonial trade in staple commodities such as fish, fur, and lumber. In his classic *Fur Trade in Canada* (1930), Innis traced Canadian economic growth from the trade in beaver pelts in the sixteenth century through the formation in the 1870s of the giant Northwest Company, the geographical and economic forerunner of the Canadian nation itself. He advanced a general argument about the mutual demands exerted by economically advanced and underdeveloped civilizations:

The fur trade was the line of contact between a relatively complex civilization and a much more simple civilization. The complex European culture had reached a stage industrially in which technological equipment essential to specialized production had been accumulated. Ships capable of undertaking

long ocean voyages, a manufacturing system which demanded large quantities of raw materials, and a distributing organization which absorbed the finished products without difficulty were typical products of European civilization. The heavy overhead cost of long voyages limited the trade to commodities which were highly valuable, to commodities demanded by the more advanced types of manufacturing processes of that period, and to commodities available on a large scale. The fur of the beaver was preeminently suited to the demands of early trade. [At the same time,] the pull of a relatively simple civilization on the resources of a complex civilization may be regarded as of paramount importance. No monopoly or organization could withstand the demands of the Indian civilization of North America for European goods. The task of continuously supplying goods to the Indian tribes of North America, of maintaining the depreciation of those goods, and replacing the goods destroyed was overwhelming.⁵

Early North American development depended on water transport from Europe. It accentuated dependence on European manufactured products and on European markets for staple raw materials. The most promising source of early trade had been coastal fishing, especially cod. Later, beaver replaced cod, bringing about interior penetration and trade with the Indians. With the depletion of the beaver, lumber became the leading staple. Following the rise of machine industry, agricultural products (particularly wheat) and minerals completed the staples cycle. After the fur trade study, Innis wrote two other staple histories, *Settlement and the Mining Frontier* (1936) and *The Cod Fisheries* (1940); he also projected a fourth on the paper and pulp industry.

Innis believed he had thus explained the crux of the Canadian historical experience. "The economic history of Canada has been dominated by the discrepancy between the center and the margin of western civilization. Energy has been directed toward the exploitation of staple products and the tendency has been cumulative. . . . Agriculture, industry, transportation, trade, finance, and governmental activities tend to become subordinate to the production of the staple for a more highly specialized manufacturing community." The Dominion had emerged not in spite of geography but because of it, along lines largely determined by the fur trade. The trade in staples, characteristic of an economically weak country, placed Canada at the mercy of highly industrialized areas—first western

Europe, later the United States. It had also been responsible for various peculiar tendencies in Canadian development: maintenance of close cultural connections with Europe, greater tolerance among her people, and a balance between government ownership and private enterprise.⁶

In the early 1930s Innis also turned his attention to the nature of the price system, the institutional structure that communicates a consensus about the relative value of goods and services. The severe dislocations of the depression forced political economists to focus on questions of current policy, particularly problems concerning greater government intervention in the Canadian economy. Innis argued that the price system was no universal, static order, as Adam Smith and the neoclassical economists had held. In Smith's time, perhaps, it had operated more efficiently and could explain more about the nature of economic relations. But historical study of the price system itself, its widely diverse tendencies varying with each nation's situation, was critical for more realistic appraisal of the economic malaise in the 1930s.

As Innis attempted to get behind the price system and to examine what made it differ in various times and places, he started to move away from strictly economic considerations. For he began to perceive that "the penetrative powers of the price system" were but one aspect of the penetrative powers of communication. He began a long and difficult trek into new and uncharted intellectual territories, reaching beyond standard economic approaches toward a new synthesis centering on the strategic importance of communication.⁷

By 1940 Innis drastically reoriented his reading and research, beginning an intensive study of the history of printing, journalism, advertising, censorship, and propaganda. He seems originally to have had in mind another staple book on the Canadian pulp and paper industry, but he never wrote it. Instead, he pursued the subject of communication as a factor hitherto virtually ignored by economists. "The character of the competition," he asserted, "varies with the communicability of knowledge. The sensitivity of economic life and the possibilities of disturbance to equilibrium are dependent to an important extent on the press."⁸

The first fruit of his work in this period was an article on "The Newspaper in Economic Development." The newspaper as an institution played a leading role in accelerating the speed of nineteenth-century communication and transportation; speed in the collection, production, and dissemination of information lay at the core of newspaper growth. The advent of the telegraph, which increased

the supply of news and rationalized its gathering, made the press a far more efficient advertising medium. Power presses raised the space capacity of newspapers and, coupled with the demands for more advertising space, forced a conversion from relatively scarce rags to wood pulp as the new raw material for newsprint. As a result, American newspapers and paper companies launched an intensive drive to control the Canadian pulp and paper mills, thus forcing a sharp decline in the price of newsprint. Here Innis documented a classic case of "cyclonic" economic development. From the Canadian point of view, the expanding American press of the post-Civil War era possessed an economic dynamic of its own, which was editorially reinforced with demands for lower tariffs in this staple industry.

The newspaper, which exploited certain types of news and was subservient to advertisers, contributed significantly to the diffusion of the price system, both horizontally over space and vertically as "a spearhead in penetrating to lower incomes." As a trailblazer in techniques of mass production, distribution, and marketing, the newspaper proved to be a harbinger of department stores and the modern consumer economy. Between 1875 and 1925, a great increase in space for features and advertising accompanied the decline in space for news and opinion. Large-scale organizations built up goodwill through press advertising, and the oligopolistic position of the newspaper became closely allied to that of business firms. Large users of advertising concentrated on the creation of effective selling techniques, whereas newspapers were compelled to develop marketing research organizations.

But Innis ended his piece cryptically: "Finally, this paper is designed to emphasize the importance of a change in the concept of the dimension of time, and to argue that it cannot be regarded in a straight line but as a series of curves depending in part on technological advances. . . . The concepts of time and space must be made relative and elastic and the attention given by the social scientist to problems of space should be paralleled by attention to the problems of time."⁹ With its insistence on immediacy and speed, both in published news and as an economic enterprise, the newspaper had severely altered our concepts of time and space. Here we find a prologue to Innis's theoretical work in communication.

In his final ten years, Innis moved beyond the discussion of communication as a motor force behind the market to an exploration of communication as the axis upon which all history turned. The word *exploration* is crucial because Innis's writing on communication,

taken as a whole, is incomplete, repetitious, and thoroughly lacking in closure. It presents not a set system of doctrine, but a sweeping and suggestive metahistorical effort at understanding the development and decline of civilizations. Innis did enormous amounts of primary research and travel for his Canadian economic studies, but he relied almost totally on secondary sources to construct a history of communication from 4,000 B.C. to the mid-twentieth century.

Systems of communication, that is, modes of symbolic representation, were the technological extensions of mind and consciousness. They therefore held the key to grasping a civilization's values, sources of authority, and organization of knowledge. Obsessive as the communication writings appear, Innis did not offer a mono-causal theory of historical change; he made frequent references to legal, political, economic, and religious institutions, as well as to geographical influences and various forms of technical change. But the lack of attention previously given to communication by social scientists as a whole required an intensive, close-up view of this neglected factor.

Innis's later work clearly bore the stamp of his Canadian treatises, although not as deeply as some have argued.¹⁰ Even as he despaired of the state of modern political economy, he continued to rely on economic metaphors and categories of thought, such as "monopoly," "equilibrium," and "bias." He exchanged a staples approach to economic history for a staples approach to cultural history; instead of beaver, cod, lumber, and minerals, he now examined such communication staples as speech, writing, clay, papyrus, and printing. Just as he had studied the staples of Canadian history to comprehend its contemporary situation, he looked now to ancient forms of communication as an aid to understanding the implications of modern media. Innis's deep commitment to Canadian nationalism spurred him on as he became more alarmed by the latest imperial incursions into Canadian society, namely, the cultural imperialism of American advertising and broadcasting.¹¹ America had replaced France and Great Britain as the empire seeking to conquer Canada. The steady jumping back-and-forth between ancient empires and current events reveals that Innis used the past as a historical laboratory for the contemplation of modern dilemmas.

There is an overall sense of roughness and incompleteness about his later work. The style is often so impenetrably dense and eclectic that it exasperates and frustrates the reader. Sometime in the 1940s Innis wrote a thousand-page unfinished manuscript, "A History of Communication." It remained unpublished, though it served as the

basis for much of the published material: *Empire and Communications* (1950), *The Bias of Communication* (1951), and *Changing Concepts of Time* (1952). These were essentially collections of oral presentations and essays rather than unified books. Nowhere does Innis present us with a coherent, clean statement of his position. He demands an adventurous reader who is willing to bring imagination and fortitude to bear on Innis's galaxy of insight and erudition.

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According to Innis, the rise and fall of civilizations and the cultural changes within an individual civilization may be understood primarily as functions of the predominant media of communication. All civilizations exist by controlling areas of space and stretches of time. They can therefore be appraised in relation to territory and duration. The "bias of communication" is the spatial or temporal tendency in media that establishes the parameters for the dissemination of knowledge over space and time.

Media that emphasize time are those that are durable in character, such as parchment, clay, and stone. The heavy materials are suited to the development of architecture and sculpture. Media that emphasize space are apt to be less durable and light in character, such as papyrus and paper. The latter are suited to wide areas in administration and trade. . . . Materials that emphasize time favor decentralization and hierarchical types of institutions, while those that emphasize space favor centralization and systems of government less hierarchical in character. Large scale political organizations such as empires must be considered from the standpoint of two dimensions, those of time and space, and persist by overcoming the bias of media which overemphasize either dimension.¹²

Monopolies of knowledge develop and decline partly in relation to the medium of communication on which they are built; these monopolies feature restriction to one medium, limitations on certain forms of knowledge, and tight control by a small power group. In cultural terms time represents a concern with history, tradition, and the growth of religious and hierarchical institutions. Space implies the growth of empire, expansion, concern with the present, and secular political authority. Temporal culture is one of faith, afterlife, ceremony, and the moral order. Spatial culture is secular, scientific, materialistic, and unbounded. Obviously, in any culture both sets of

values are operative, one dominantly and one recessively. Innis saw the rise and fall of civilizations, especially empires, in terms of a dialectic between competing monopolies of knowledge based on the temporal or spatial bias.¹³

Only at rare intervals had a civilization managed to achieve a balance between time- and space-biased media, for example, classical Greece, Renaissance Italy, and Elizabethan England. Western civilization was now in terrible danger of disintegration because of its failure to confront the problems of duration. Innis set up a series of ideal dualisms or, more properly, continuums in the history of communication to illustrate the historical dialectic of monopolies of knowledge based on competing media. The experience of past civilizations clearly held a lesson for the present; the understanding of a civilization's media bias was necessary, if not sufficient, for the survival of that civilization.

The contrast between oral and written modes of communication provided a paradigm for all later media. An oral tradition is one of consensually shared standards and sacred beliefs. The achievement of Greek civilization, for example, reflected the power of the spoken word. "Continuous philosophic discussion aimed at truth. The life and movement of dialectic opposed the establishment of a finished system of dogma." Innis made no secret of his own bias toward the oral tradition and the necessity for recapturing some of its spirit, particularly in the modern university. "The oral dialectic is overwhelmingly significant where the subject matter is human action and feeling, and it is important in the discovery of new truth but of very little value in disseminating it. The oral discussion inherently involves personal contact and a consideration of the feelings of others, and it is in sharp contrast with the cruelty of mechanized communication and the tendencies which we have come to note in the modern world."¹⁴

The appearance of writing caused a shift away from the oral tradition and toward secular authority, with the resultant emphasis on spatial over temporal relations. Writing at first simply recorded the oral tradition, petrifying it and thus eliminating the essence of oral dialectic. In a culture based on written tradition, knowledge is based on the administrative and technical needs of the present and future empire, rather than on the traditional time-based codes of oral culture. In ancient Egypt and Babylonia small groups of priests originally established monopoly control over complex systems of writing such as hieroglyphics and cuneiform. These monopolies

were gradually destroyed by simpler writing systems, which greatly enlarged the class of scribes and facilitated government administration over larger areas.

Development of a highly flexible phonetic alphabet, which first appeared among the commercial Phoenicians, further propelled the spatial bias. In Greece, the spread of papyrus and writing based on a phonetic alphabet at first brought a magnificent balance to Greek culture, culminating in tragedy and the writings of Plato. Eventually, however, writing contributed to the collapse of Greek civilization by widening the gap between city states and by ossifying the philosophical method of the oral tradition.

The Byzantine empire also developed on the basis of a blending between organizations reflecting different media biases, "that of papyrus in the development of an imperial bureaucracy in relation to a vast area and that of parchment in the development of an ecclesiastical hierarchy in relation to time."¹⁵ Just at the point where a medium created a monopoly of knowledge, a new medium subversively broke through, usually on the outer fringes of a society. Parchment, biased toward time, was adapted by monasticism and contributed to the growth of a powerful ecclesiastical organization in western Europe. It invited competition from paper, which favored space. Italy's near monopoly of paper production in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe coincided with its strength as a commercial center ("keeping books"), the emergence of professional writers, and the revival of learning.

Printing became the dominant medium of Western civilization and remained so pervasive that one can hardly comprehend the environment it created. Printing represented the birth of a machine process based on uniform repeatability; as such, it provided a model for subsequent developments of mass production and for the standardization of goods and knowledge. It reversed the Greek maxim "nothing in excess" by ushering in a civilization that might be described as "everything in excess." By the seventeenth century, it had successfully challenged the time bias of the medieval church, whose authority was based on parchment manuscript. Printing accelerated the spatial bias of paper and fostered the rise of nationalism, vernacular languages, and the extension of political bureaucracy.¹⁶

Printing achieved its most complete monopoly of knowledge in America. There, "the modern obsession with present-mindedness" stemming from printing's space bias found protection in the U.S. Constitution, which supported the rapid growth of the newspaper industry. "The overwhelming pressure of mechanization evident in

the newspaper and the magazine has led to the creation of vast monopolies of communication. Their entrenched position involves a continuous, systematic, ruthless destruction of permanence essential to cultural activity. The emphasis on change is the only permanent characteristic."

The power of the American newspaper industry enabled it to monopolize the Canadian pulp and paper trade and to force low tariffs—this was economic monopoly. But a growing cultural monopoly troubled Innis as well. For the finished products derived from pulp and paper consisted largely of advertising and reading material exported back into Canada, a cultural bombardment that threatened Canadian national life. "Canadian publications supported by the advertising of products of American branch plants and forced to compete with American publications imitate them in format, style, and content. Canadian writers must adapt themselves to American standards. Our poets and painters are reduced to the status of sandwich men."

In its drive to conquer space and new markets, the press transformed our notions of time. Modern press associations turned news into a commodity, which could be sold in competition and monopolized like any other. "Lack of continuity in news is the inevitable result of dependence on advertisements for the sale of goods," hence the emphasis on excitement, sensationalism, and capriciousness in news. Innis's study of the press suggested that time had been spatialized into "a uniform and quantitative continuum" obscuring qualitative differences. "Advertisers build up monopolies of time to an important extent through the use of news. They are able to take full advantage of technological advances in communication and to place information before large numbers at the earliest possible moment. Market changes in the speed of communication have far reaching effects on monopolies over time because of their impact on the most sensitive elements of the economic system."¹⁷

Innis made only tentative attempts to extend his analysis into the realm of newer media such as radio and television. He suggested that radio, with its appeal to the ear, signaled a return to the consideration of problems of time, as reflected in the growth of government planning and the welfare state. He noted, for example, that Franklin D. Roosevelt, architect of the New Deal, depended heavily on the radio to win approval of his policies.¹⁸ But radio presaged a return to oral tradition only in a shallow sense. If one extends Innis's thinking here, it appears that broadcasting was actually stepping up the spatial bias of the modern era. Radio and television receivers are

light and easily transportable; electromagnetic waves are far more ephemeral than newspapers. Broadcasting ignores national boundaries and has thus conquered space with electricity, a process begun by the electric telegraph. Furthermore, the principle of paid advertising underlies American broadcasting. Radio and television function by literally "selling time," thereby radically extending the spatialization process.

Although Innis failed to apply his own analysis to the emergence of broadcasting, he nonetheless understood the implications of the latest communications technology for both the economic and cultural expansion of American vested interests. The proximity of Canada's largest population centers to American broadcast facilities extended "the omnipotence of American commercialism," making it "inevitable that the United States should dominate English culture." Even with Canada's own broadcasting system, the American influence was pervasive. Indeed, in 1957 the Royal Commission on Broadcasting found that, of the total television fare on the English-language Canadian television stations, American-produced programs composed 53 percent of the total as compared with 44 percent Canadian-produced shows. Of the total program output of all Canadian television stations, 49 percent was produced in Canada, 48 percent in the United States.¹⁹

To Innis, Canada seemed to be an embattled cultural island, a last bastion of the oral tradition. To a great degree, his communication studies dovetailed with his trenchant criticism of America's cold war policies, internal and external. Innis waged a lonely battle against the enormous pressures on Canadian politicians and intellectuals to follow the American line in foreign relations and its crackdown on "domestic subversion." Fear of depression during the postwar reconversion period meant an American emphasis on military expenditures to ensure full employment. Canadian political life was in danger of becoming distorted by the constraints of American foreign policy. "Americans," Innis noted, "are the best propagandists because they are the best advertisers."

American foreign policy, which was largely determined by public opinion whipped up by a sensationalist press, represented a "disgraceful illustration of the irresponsibility of a powerful nation which promises little for the future stability of the Western World." Innis held out a vague hope that Canadian autonomy might be preserved by alliance with a third bloc of neutral countries. But his realism and dismay about America's great advantages, especially those of advanced communications technology, inclined him toward

despair: "We may dislike American influence, we may develop a Canadian underground movement, but we are compelled to yield to American policy. We may say that democracy has become something which Americans wish to impose upon us because they say that they have it in the United States; we may dislike the assumption of Americans that they have found the one and only way of life—but they have American dollars."²⁰

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In the final few years before his untimely death in 1952, Innis's thought moved into more unorthodox and speculative regions than perhaps even he realized. His switch from the consideration of material staples to that of staples of the mind pushed him toward the beginnings of a philosophy of history. He employed a dialectical method to explain the rise and fall of civilizations. Whereas Hegel focused on nation states and Marx on modes of production, Innis substituted communications media to identify the great epochs. The growth of the Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, and British empires depended largely on their ability to extend control over time and space by balancing competing monopolies of knowledge. Each of these monopolies had been based on a specific medium—speech, complex writing (phonetic alphabet on papyrus and paper), or print.

Yet Innis saw not cumulative progress but a steady disintegration toward the end of Western civilization, literally, the end of time. Earlier communications theorists such as Charles Horton Cooley and Robert Park had portrayed advances in communications techniques in terms of linear advance, a prerequisite to the forward march of civilization. For Cooley, contemporary innovations in communications technology ensured at least the mechanical conditions that must precede the organic society. Each historical advance in communication, from primitive gesture through broadcasting, contributed to the ceaseless progressive evolution of the social order.

Innis's vision seemed to be moving toward a rather radical pessimism. It had more in common with the ironic stance of Henry Adams than with the Progressive tradition represented by Cooley. Adams had centered his final speculation about the ultimate direction of history around the concept of energy degradation. In juxtaposing the second law of thermodynamics (physics) with Darwinism (biology), Adams offered a vision of evolution as a downward process. He noted the paradox between modern society's tremendous capacity to exploit energy and the latest advances in physical theory,

which suggested that this merely reflected the tendency of the universe toward entropy. From the physicist's point of view, "Man, as a conscious and constant, single natural force, seems to have no function except that of dissipating or degrading energy."²¹

For Innis, communication rather than energy served as the operative principle. Any final philosophy of history he might have worked out would surely have been closely intertwined with a philosophy of knowledge, namely, how changes in communication affect the way we think. Innis wondered if all the improvements in communication had in fact worked against man's understanding, particularly his understanding of the timeless problems of Western culture. The political economy in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* embodied general and universal principles; such an approach deteriorated when it was subordinated to mathematical abstraction, science, and obsession with the price system and problems of the moment. The spatial bias of the modern press and the demands of advertising had turned economics and the social sciences toward specialization and fixation on short-run problems.

Enormous compilations of statistics confront the social scientist. He is compelled to interpret them or to discover patterns or trends which will enable him to predict the future. With the use of elaborate calculating machines and of refinement in mathematical technique he can develop formulae to be used by industry and business and by governments in the formulation of policy. But elaboration assumes prediction for short periods of time. Work in the social sciences has become increasingly concerned with topical problems and social science departments become schools of journalism. The difficulty of handling the concept of time in economic theory and of developing a reconciliation between static and dynamic approaches is a reflection of the neglect of the time factor in Western civilization.²²

"Industrialization of the mind" and "mechanized knowledge" threatened the traditional role of the university, making it subservient to the military, the vested interests of business, and the state bureaucracy. The university, where an individual once learned to assess problems in terms of time and space, to acquire a sense of balance and proportion, and to decide how much or how little information he needed, was rapidly declining.

Innis's concern paralleled that of Robert Park, who wrote an influential piece on physics and society in which he wondered if sci-

ence, "in awakening the vast energies that are resident in the material world, brought into existence forces which science cannot hope to control?" Because of the destruction of the time bias, the problem for both the modern university and modern civilization was how to create moral forces to counterbalance the forces unleashed by the physical sciences.²³ Unlike Park, though, Innis did not regard modern communication as a means of achieving scientific reporting in the press. Nor did he share the Progressive hope that new media would contribute to an objective social science.

Innis held little expectation that twentieth-century civilization could escape the monopolies of knowledge built up through the bias of modern communication. He emphasized the "extraordinary, perhaps insuperable, difficulty of assessing the quality of a culture of which we are a part or of assessing the quality of a culture of which we are not a part." In the modern West, "we are perhaps too much a part of the civilization which followed the spread of the printing industry to be able to determine its characteristics." America, where the full impact of printing accrued through the Bill of Rights, now threatened the survival of that civilization. America's strongest tradition was her lack of tradition. The problem of getting outside of America's space-oriented bias appeared insoluble.²⁴

The revulsion against mechanized knowledge, anguish over the decline in university life, and pleas for recapturing some of the oral tradition of the Greeks all echoed rather familiar sentiments held by a large fraction of twentieth-century intellectuals. Combined with the Canadian perspective on American power, Innis arrived at a most gloomy position by the end of his life. His greatest mission at that point seems to have been playing the prophet, reminding us of the fate of all empires (including America's) determined to blindly ignore the biases of their culture.

As a historian of communication, however, Innis may ultimately provide a clearer understanding of modern media, even though he warned of the difficulties of escaping their biases. One recalls that he began his communication studies by applying the tools of economic history to media and by treating media as he did economic staples. Intensive study of the physical characteristics of staple resources and of the technological changes and market influences that gave them economic significance served as the focal point for analyzing a total economic situation.

In one sense, Innis's work in communication represented an attempt to overcome the Veblenian dualism of business and industry and to locate the crucial link between these two tendencies of the

modern economy. Advances in communication technology were closely tied to the pressure for market expansion, which was necessary for greater profits. Whereas Veblen concentrated on new technologies of production, Innis focused on advances in communication as new technologies for consumption. As America led the advance of industrial production, so it pioneered new technologies of consumption. Innis originally followed this approach in showing how the American press and advertising matrix directly impinged on the Canadian economy. And here was the takeoff point for his metahistorical flights.

As with his philosophical speculations on media, Innis's historical method holds rich possibilities as a guide to further research. The rise of broadcasting may again serve as an example. Although the technology of the modern newspaper emerged several centuries after the first printing press, that of broadcasting appeared only sixty years after James Clerk-Maxwell's mathematical prediction of electromagnetic waves. Wireless telegraphy and wireless telephony both developed with the crucial aid of corporate research facilities and government sponsorship. The demands of military strategy cannot be neglected in any history of radio *technique*. However, radio *technology*, a fully integrated and public system of communication, arrived after World War I in the form of radio broadcasting. From the first, radio broadcasting performed a marketing function; it originated as a stimulus to the sale of surplus radio equipment stockpiled by the large electrical corporations. But with the rise of commercial broadcasting in the mid-1920s, radio soon served this function for the entire economy. It produced no product as such, but greatly enlarged markets for all consumer goods.

The great geniuses of radio and television have been marketing geniuses. Broadcasting became the most space-biased of all modern media. It centralized and intensified the advertising and marketing functions performed by the nineteenth-century press. It accelerated the redefinition of time into pecuniary units. The penetration of radio and television into every household was unprecedented. Modern communication thus provided outlets for the greatest productive capacity (industry) ever, laying the foundation for the greatest marketing machinery (business) in history.

Innis's legacy, then, is a complex one reflecting the tension between the economic, moral, and metahistorical meanings of communication. His early pursuit of the economic implications of communication led him to interpret the media from the perspective of a moral critic of modern civilization. His historical researches were

not enough, however; he felt compelled to consider communication outside its historical development, to probe the way new media altered our notions of time and space. The importance of confronting the many levels of Innis's contribution is reinforced when one considers the direction taken by his most prominent disciple, Marshall McLuhan. For with McLuhan, the subtleties of "Inniscence" disappeared into the mists of mythology.

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Writing about Marshall McLuhan, one faces a bundle of paradoxes wrapped in a central contradiction. McLuhan speaks in at least two distinct voices; he is a Janus-like figure whose public adventures have contributed to the confusion surrounding the meaning of what he has to say. He wants desperately to elevate his media theory to the level of science. He insists that he is a clinically detached observer who scientifically analyzes the impact of communications media on the mind and society. At the same time, he proclaims that he is readily willing to discard anything that he has ever said, that he has no desire to defend past statements, and that he must rely on the method of "insight" since cause-and-effect reasoning is obsolete. This second McLuhan operates something like a Renaissance fool, punning and blustering along in a rollicking intellectual slapstick.

Not surprisingly, McLuhan's pretensions to scientific discourse and objectivity, as well as his encyclopedic and highly selective appeals to authorities from many fields of knowledge, leave him highly vulnerable to technical attacks from various quarters. There have already been numerous devastating critiques on nearly every facet of his theory.²⁵ He has certainly been discredited as a "scientist." Both his mature speculations and their wide popularity appear to have been singular phenomena of the 1960s. Only a short time later, much of his writing already has the quality of a period piece, curiously quaint and outdated.

Yet technical critiques of McLuhan are somewhat beside the point. How does one logically attack a court jester, a man who declares the end of linear logic? McLuhan's analysis of modern media has profoundly transformed our perceptions of twentieth-century life, particularly for the generation born after World War II. When the French coined the term *mcluhanisme*, they were referring not only to the man but also to a new cultural stance, a commitment to the serious examination of popular culture. If nothing else, McLuhan's efforts instilled an urgent awareness of the media environment as a basic force shaping the modern sensibility.

A post-McLuhan writer thus faces the vexing problem of severing himself from the intellectual milieu created by the subject itself, of somehow correcting what Innis might have termed the "McLuhan bias." This problem parallels McLuhan's own attempts to get outside of the media environment surrounding us in order to understand it. A historical approach to McLuhan may perhaps seem premature at this point, but it offers one route out of this impasse. McLuhan's spectacular notoriety during the 1960s resembled the arrival of a streaking meteor from outer space, and the public McLuhan did everything possible to reinforce the notion that he came from nowhere. In fact, he came from several places. Notwithstanding the claim that he had no point of view, very real (though shifting) moral, psychological, and political beliefs can be discerned throughout his development.

McLuhan's career may be roughly divided into three periods: his early years as a traditional literary critic, ending with the publication of his first book, *The Mechanical Bride* (1951); a transitional phase in the 1950s during which he adapted the work of Harold Innis, immersed himself in cultural anthropology, and edited the journal *Explorations*; and the mature stage of the 1960s, when he published his theories in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), *Understanding Media* (1964), and several lesser works.

For a very public figure, little is known about McLuhan's private life or early years. He has been deliberately vague and even misleading on the subject of his own biography. One can reconstruct only the bare outlines. He was born in 1911 in Edmonton, Alberta, the son of a Methodist insurance salesman and a Baptist actress. He studied engineering at the University of Manitoba, where he received his B.A. and M.A. degrees in 1933 and 1934. A growing zeal for English literature eclipsed his original desire to be an engineer. He enrolled at Trinity Hall in Cambridge University in 1935, completing an M.A. and eventually his Ph.D. in 1942; the subject of his doctoral dissertation was the Elizabethan writer and educator, Thomas Nashe. McLuhan began his career as a teacher at the University of Wisconsin in 1936. At some point in the late 1930s he converted to Roman Catholicism. He taught literature at two Catholic schools, St. Louis University (1937 to 1944) and Assumption University in Windsor, Ontario (1945 to 1946). After 1946 he served as professor of literature at the University of Toronto; in 1963 he became director of its Center for Culture and Technology.²⁶

McLuhan pursued a sedate career as teacher and critic for some twenty years, publishing numerous pieces on a wide variety of

writers from the medieval period through the modern era. At Cambridge, McLuhan was deeply influenced by the methodology and moral temper of the so-called New Critics, particularly I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis. Richards, drawing on the latest work in behavioral psychology and philosophy, sought to construct a science of criticism by examining how literature produces certain psychological states. In works such as *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1925) and *Practical Criticism* (1929) he extended the scope of philosophical empiricism to embrace the logical structure of meaning itself. He insisted that a work's merit was separate from both the author's own intentions and from any biographical influences. Leavis, editor of the influential journal *Scrutiny*, emphasized criticism based on the unity and formal structure of the work itself—the text is all. He held that the critic must focus on the internal relationships between various parts of the text and must explicate all its layers of meaning, ambiguity, and paradox. Interpretation could only be accomplished through the structure of a work's own language; literary theory, philosophy, and history were irrelevant.

Politically and spiritually the New Criticism, and most of the writers associated with it, expressed deep antagonism to modern industrial civilization. It celebrated instead the lost organic unity of agrarian Christian culture. Significantly, McLuhan's first published essay in 1936 resounded with praise for G. K. Chesterton, "for seeking to re-establish agriculture and small property as the only free basis for a free culture." Chesterton's *What's Wrong With the World* (1910) apparently had an important role in McLuhan's Catholic conversion, an act that meshed neatly with his literary interests of that period.²⁷

Through his own literary criticism, McLuhan expressed a personal variant of the Tory, neo-Catholic, antimodern tradition flourishing on both sides of the Atlantic. His vigorous promotion of modernist writers such as Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Yeats derived largely from their critique of what Eliot labeled the "dissociation of sensibility," a feature of modern secular civilization. Yet McLuhan's essays on American writers and his reading of American history reveal most clearly the aesthetic, political, and moral position of these early years.

McLuhan posited an underlying split in the American mind and society, one that reflected an old struggle over the nature of education and learning. He championed the "Southern quality" in American letters, the passionate, historical, and tragic sense of life exemplified in the works of Poe, Twain, Faulkner, Cabell, Tate, and oth-

ers. In McLuhan's view, southern culture stood as a modern manifestation of the Ciceronian ideal of "rational man reaching his noblest attainment in the expression of an eloquent wisdom." According to McLuhan, ever since Socrates used dialectics against the rhetoric of his sophist teachers, a continuing quarrel had raged over whether grammar and rhetoric on the one hand or dialectics on the other should prevail in organizing knowledge. The debate continued among medieval and Renaissance authorities, with the Schoolmen insisting that one part of the trivium be the superior method in theology (dialectics) and the humanists insisting on the others (grammar, rhetoric). As the quarrel heightened in seventeenth-century England, representatives of both parties migrated to America—the Schoolmen to New England and the quasi-humanist gentry to Virginia.

In America, McLuhan argued, the two radically opposed intellectual traditions developed on new soil and were geographically separated for the first time. Nourished by the agrarian estate life of the South, the Ciceronian ideal reached its flower in "the scholar statesman of encyclopedic knowledge, profound practical experience, and voluble social and public eloquence." It produced, among other things, the most creative tradition in American political thought, a tradition that stretched from Jefferson to Wilson. It advocated an agrarian society with every man as aristocrat and subordinated knowledge and action to a political good. On the other hand, the New England mind afforded a sharp contrast. Based on the Ramist application of dialectics to theological controversy, it embodied a thoroughly different tradition: "For this mind there is nothing which cannot be settled by *method*. It is the mind which weaves the intricacies of efficient production, 'scientific' scholarship, and business administration. It doesn't permit itself an inkling of what constitutes a social or political problem . . . simply because there is no method for tackling such problems." McLuhan thus reduced American history to an internal debate within the medieval trivium. Southern literature's stress on passion versus the northern concern with character, the Civil War, and the educational debate at Chicago over the "Great Books" program all reflected the intellectual struggle of the humanist against the technological specialist.²⁸

McLuhan left no doubt where his own sympathies lay. His affinity with the southern Agrarian movement of the 1920s and 1930s is striking. McLuhan, the Catholic and provincial Canadian, joined John Crowe Ransom in celebrating the South as the true inheritor of the humanist tradition, "unique on this continent for having

founded and defended a culture which was according to the European principles of culture."²⁹ In opposition to it, McLuhan lumped together northern business civilization, the gospel of progress, urban decadence, "social engineers," John Dewey, and a crude caricature of Marxism. Slavery was dismissed as merely the one main condition of aristocratic life present in the South and absent in the North. Although physically defeated in the Civil War, the South remained spiritually sound and was the best hope for the perpetuation of the Christian humanist tradition in North America.

In *The Mechanical Bride* (1951), his first full-scale analysis of modern media and popular culture, McLuhan combined the exegetic techniques of the New Criticism with the moral perspective expressed in the early literary essays. This was an important work in McLuhan's evolution. It was an attempt to apply a literary technique to a new subject matter in order to preserve the humanist values so central to his writing. *The Mechanical Bride* contains a sharp tension between McLuhan's clear desire to criticize the "collective trance" induced by modern communication (especially through advertising) and his movement toward a strategy of "suspended judgement," of considering the forms of media content on their own terms as aesthetic wholes.

In the preface he identified his method with that of Edgar Allan Poe's sailor in the story "Descent into the Maelstrom": "Poe's sailor saved himself by studying the action of the whirlpool and by cooperating with it. The present book likewise makes few attempts to attack the very considerable currents and pressures set up around us today by the mechanical agencies of the press, radio, movies, and advertising." McLuhan hoped to set the reader at the center of the media maelstrom for the purpose of an objective study:

Poe's sailor says that when locked in by the whirling walls and the numerous objects which floated in that environment: 'I must have been delirious, for I even sought amusement in speculating upon the relative velocities of their several descents toward the foam below.' It was this amusement born of his rational detachment as a spectator of his own situation that gave him the thread which led him out of the Labyrinth. And it is in the same spirit that this book is offered as an amusement. Many who are accustomed to the note of moral indignation will mistake this amusement for mere indifference.³⁰

McLuhan offered several dozen short meditations on a wide assortment of texts: advertisements, comic strips, radio shows, pulp

characters, magazines, and recurring themes in the "folklore of industrial man." Like the psychoanalyst interpreting the dream images of his patient, McLuhan argued that everyday popular culture held a rich source of data for diagnosing the "collective trance" or "dream state" into which industrial society had fallen. Ads seemed to be "a kind of social ritual or magic that flatter and enhance us in our own eyes." American advertising consistently proclaimed freedom of choice as the foundation of the American way of life, but glossed over questions of power and control. "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."

For McLuhan, "freedom, like taste, is an activity of perception and judgement based on a great range of particular acts and experiences—Whatever fosters mere passivity and submission is the enemy of this vital activity." He scoffed at merely "reforming" the media industries through changes in policies of entertainment and control. Instead he proposed to educate the individual sensibility and to break the hypnotic attraction of the media through the tough-minded evaluation of "unpleasant facts under the conditions of art and controlled observation." Popular culture was a valuable index of the guiding impulses and dominant drives in society precisely because it resembled the psychoanalytic data yielded by individuals or groups involuntarily, in moments of inattention. McLuhan tried to beat the ad agencies and market researchers at their own game by probing the collective unconscious to which they appealed.³¹

What are the central images and myths in this industrial folklore? An unrelenting diet of sex, death, and technological advance, ingeniously interwoven in cluster patterns designed to sell merchandise. We get the car as sex object, the female body reduced to dissociated mechanical parts, and the equation of sexuality with power. We read the ghoulish appeals to violent death in the press and pulps. Images of hectic speed, mayhem, violence, and instant death imply that sex is no longer the ultimate thrill. With the high-powered techniques of applied science, market research, and polling behind them, the modern ad agencies have usurped the ancient Ciceronian claim for eloquence as the way to power and influence. The "eloquence" of commerce today attempts to keep the consumer and citizen from ever questioning the naturalness of these cultural themes. "Far from being a conscious conspiracy, this is a nightmare dream from which we would do well to awaken at once."³²

Finally, *The Mechanical Bride* was an argument for a new kind of

education and a plea for the development of critical intellect by using the very sources that manipulated, exploited, and controlled the public with unprecedented power. During the 1940s McLuhan vigorously defended the "Great Books" program at Chicago and humanist programs of general studies.³³ With his first book, however, McLuhan argued that formal education of any type could not hope to compete with the unofficial education people received from the new media. "The classroom cannot compete with the glitter and the billion dollar success and prestige of this commercial education. Least of all with a commercial education program which is designed as entertainment and which by-passes the intelligence while operating directly on the will and the desires."

Like a modern-day Erasmus, McLuhan proposed a wholesale shake-up of our educational priorities. Robert Hutchins called the media barrage a "constant storm of triviality and propaganda that now beats upon the citizen"; McLuhan thought it could be controlled only by critical inspection. "Its baneful effects are at present entirely dependent on its being ignored." To McLuhan, the unofficial commercial culture reflected the true native culture of the industrial world. "And it is through the native culture, or not at all, that we effect contact with past cultures. For the quality of anybody's relations with the minds of the past is exactly and necessarily determined by the quality of his contemporary insights."³⁴

The Mechanical Bride proffered an essentially literary study of media content, an explication of the literature of everyday life. It marked a real turning point in McLuhan's career, the beginning of his own descent into the maelstrom of media studies. Perhaps it is worth recalling that Poe's sailor, although able to save himself by means of an extraordinary curiosity, was powerless to save his two brothers on the ship. He escaped his fate only after he gave up hope. "I positively felt a wish to explore its depth, even at the sacrifice I was going to make; and my principle grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see." Indeed, his old mates who eventually pulled him up out of the sea could not even recognize their friend—his hair now turned white, his whole countenance changed. They refused to believe his tale.

After this book, McLuhan moved away from the interpretation of modern myth toward the construction of his own mythology, and many of his old mates found it difficult to believe his tale. But two crucial influences helped shape his thinking at Toronto during the 1950s. One was his exposure to Harold Innis. The second was his

involvement in the culture and communication seminar; its short-lived journal *Explorations* thoroughly immersed him in cultural anthropology. As a result, his work took a decisive turn toward the glorification of neoprimitivism and away from what he jeeringly began to call the "single point of view."

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McLuhan borrowed from Innis the tools with which to extend an aesthetic doctrine into an all-encompassing theory of social change. Innis's historical and economic studies provided the intellectual legitimacy for McLuhan's grand leap from investigating the forms of transmitted messages to the forms of transmission themselves. Innis's extension of the analysis of economic staples to an exploration of communication forms and media biases paralleled the New Critical method that McLuhan absorbed at Cambridge: in a work of art the form is the content and the only valid criterion for judging a work. Or, as McLuhan wrote in an early piece on the relationship between economics and communication, "it is the formal characteristics of the medium, recurring in a variety of material situations, and not any particular 'message,' which constitutes the efficacy of its historical action."³⁵

McLuhan declared in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* that Harold Innis was "the first person to hit upon the process of change as implicit in the forms of media technology. The present book is a footnote of explanation to his work."³⁶ This was a rather disingenuous accolade, but it squared with McLuhan's overall simplification and mystification of Innis's accomplishments. McLuhan read Innis's contribution to communication studies as a purely methodological one, pursued by a man with no motivation save the desire to break out of the "single point of view" and into the realm of "insight." For McLuhan, the single point of view characteristic of Innis's traditional historical work (and of all print culture) was a severely limited way of *looking at* something. Insight, however, was the sudden awareness of a complex process of interaction, the technique of discovering by juxtaposing multiple aspects of a situation.

McLuhan thus described the later Innis as inevitably adopting "a discontinuous style, an aphoristic, mental camera sort of procedure which was indispensable to his needs. . . . He juxtaposes one condensed observation with another, mounts one insight or image on another in quick succession to create a sense of the multiple relationships in process of undergoing rapid development from the impact of specific technological changes. . . . It is an ideogrammic

prose, a complex mental cinema." Although this type of writing does appear in Innis, this passage is a more accurate account of McLuhan's own style. In McLuhan's paeans to Innis we catch a glimpse of his own self-image: "The later Innis had no position. He had become a roving mental eye, an intellectual radar screen on the alert for objective clues to the inner spirit or core of our times."³⁷

McLuhan chose to ignore Innis's political and moral position on communication, his Canadian nationalism, and his critique of American media. He preferred to view Innis as a poet or artist, but at the same time he condescendingly lamented Innis's deficiencies in the use of artistic analysis. He compared Innis's patterns of insights to symbolist poetry and modern painting. That is to say, in order to avoid the lineality of print and to present a dynamic model of history, Innis presented a rapid montagelike shot of events, a mosaic structure of insights. The primacy of aesthetic categories in McLuhan's thought forced him into this narrow reading of Innis. Once again, it is difficult not to see McLuhan's own wish fulfillment in operation here.³⁸

From 1953 to 1955 McLuhan chaired an ongoing interdisciplinary seminar on culture and communication at Toronto; the seminar was sponsored by the Ford Foundation. Along with anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, McLuhan started and edited *Explorations*, a lively quixotic journal designed to give seminar members an outlet. The purpose of this journal was to go beyond the literary concepts of media study, beyond the limitations of content analysis. Its basic premise held that changes in communication modified human sensibilities as well as human relations. Print technology, the basis of American educational and industrial establishments, was on the verge of being superseded by the electronic revolution in communication. By means of the journal, McLuhan and Carpenter hoped to develop an awareness of the role of print and literacy in shaping Western society and to investigate implications of the newer configurations of electronic media. Because literary and literacy biases were so deeply rooted, how could one step outside of them for objective explorations?³⁹

The answer in large part was a radical shift toward studies of the language and communication systems in primitive societies. In one article, Dorothy Lee analyzed the speech of Trobriand islanders. She argued that no past or present tenses and no causal or teleological relationships existed in their language. They did not perceive lineal order as a value. They avoided seeing patterns as connected lines; lineal connection (cause and effect) was not automatically made in

their language. Edmund Carpenter also found similar characteristics in the thought and speech of Aivilik Eskimos. In another article, Siegfried Giedion claimed that ancient cave paintings could not be understood from the space perspectives of today. These primitive artists saw things without any relation to the self. Their conception of space revealed the psychic realities confronting prehistoric man; their art does not seem rational to a twentieth-century individual because it lacks a sense of the horizontal and vertical.⁴⁰

McLuhan and Carpenter postulated polarities between the sensory lives of preliterate and literate societies, between ear-oriented and eye-oriented cultures. In preliterate culture "acoustic space" prevailed; perception was keyed to the ear, but involved the simultaneous interplay of all senses. Tribal art served as a means of merging the individual and his environment, not as a means of training his perception of that environment. On the other hand, the "visual space" characteristic of literate man focused on the particular and abstracted it from a total situation; hence "seeing is believing." Both men held that the eye operates in isolation, perceiving a flat continuous world and favoring one thing at a time. The transition from spoken word to writing and printing elevated the sense of sight to a paramount place, truncating one sense from the cluster of human senses. This detachment allowed great power over the environment by fragmenting fields of perception. But the alienation from all senses except sight also produced emotional detachment, a declining ability to feel, express, and experience emotions.⁴¹

During the *Explorations* period, McLuhan moved toward an explicit analogy between preliterate and postliterate cultures. New forms of electronic media seemed to have reversed the sensory fragmentation of visual space, thus foreshadowing a psychic return to the tribal situation. Like art forms, they magically transformed the environment around us. In 1955 he wrote: "The new media are not bridges between man and nature; they are nature. . . . By surpassing writing, we have regained our Wholeness, not on a national or cultural, but cosmic plane. We have evoked a super-civilized sub-primitive man. . . . We are back in acoustic space. We begin again to structure the primordial feelings and emotions from which 3000 years of literacy divorced us."⁴²

★

McLuhan's mature theory rests on a new version of the Christian myth, enabling McLuhan to concentrate on elaborating a psychology

and ecology of modern media. For Eden, the Fall, and paradise regained, McLuhan substituted tribalism (oral culture), detribalization (phonetic alphabet and print), and retribalization (electronic media). Unlike Innis, who was interested mainly in the relationship between communication and social organization, McLuhan's argument primarily concerned the impact of media technology on the human sensorium.⁴³

The Gutenberg Galaxy presented a protracted meditation on the sensory and cultural results of phonetic literacy and printing. Relying heavily on quotations from scientific authorities and literary favorites, McLuhan fleshed out the psychology merely hinted at in the *Explorations* period. Technological tools, such as the wheel or the alphabet, became mega-extensions of human sense organs or bodily functions. Each new media technology possessed the power to hypnotize because it isolated the senses, which in tribal man presumably existed in perfect symmetry. A division of faculties and a change in sense ratios occurred when any one sense or bodily function was externalized in technological form.

Those who experience the first onset of a new technology, whether it be alphabet or radio, respond most emphatically because the new sense ratios, set up at once by the technological dilation of eye or ear, present men with a surprising new world, which evokes a vigorous new "closure," or novel pattern of interplay, among all of the senses together. But the initial shock gradually dissipates as the entire community absorbs the new habit of perception into all of its areas of work and association. But the real revolution is in this later and prolonged phase of "adjustment" of all personal and social life to the new model of perception set up by the new technology.⁴⁴

The phonetic alphabet made the first critical break between eye and ear, between semantic meaning and visual code. Unlike pictographic or syllabic forms of writing, the phonetic alphabet assigned semantically meaningless letters to semantically meaningless sounds. By extending and intensifying the visual function, it diminished the roles of the other senses of hearing, touch, and taste in literate cultures. Following Innis, McLuhan pointed to the Greek myth of King Cadmus, who introduced the phonetic alphabet to Greece. He was said to have sown the dragon's teeth that later sprang up as armed men. The alphabet meant power and authority, especially because it provided a means of controlling military structures at a distance. Combined with papyrus, it spelled the end of

priestly monopolies of knowledge and power and, by implication, the destruction of nonalphabetic cultures. "By the meaningless sign linked to the meaningless sound," McLuhan asserted, "we have built the shape and meaning of Western man."⁴⁵

The invention of movable type completed the process of alienating man from his original tribal state of a participatory, "audile-tactile" way of life. "The invention of typography confirmed and extended the new visual stress of applied knowledge, providing the first repeatable commodity, the first assembly line, and the first mass production." As such, print differed markedly from the phonetic literacy expressed in written manuscripts. Compared to printed books, medieval manuscripts were of low definition; they were usually read out loud and thus required some interplay of the senses. The printed book mechanically intensified the effects of the phonetic alphabet, further fragmenting sensory life by heightening the visual bias. It made reading a more private and silent activity. The book's portability also contributed to a new cult of individualism. By turning the spoken language into a closed visual system, print created the uniform and centralizing conditions necessary for nationalism. When the assumptions of homogeneous repeatability were extended to other concerns of life, they "led gradually to all those forms of production and social organization from which the Western world derives many satisfactions and nearly all of its characteristic traits."⁴⁶

The Gutenberg Galaxy is a great synthetic work, a tour de force of humanist scholarship. McLuhan's own contribution to it rested largely on his interpretations of Renaissance authors; he invariably reduced their works to sophisticated comments on the impact of print in their time. As artists, Shakespeare, Pope, Marlowe, Swift, Rabelais, and More were the only contemporaries capable of understanding the traumas brought on by the new print technology.

McLuhan saw the present age as a new Renaissance, a new sensory galaxy ushered in by electronic media that are capable of jolting our sensibilities as sharply as the printing press did earlier. The present is the "early part of an age for which the meaning of print culture is becoming as alien as the meaning of manuscript culture was to the eighteenth century." Ironically, America, which has the largest backlog of obsolete technology, now leads the transition into the electronic era. It thus suffers the most severe pains of conversion. "The new electric galaxy of events has already moved deeply into the Gutenberg galaxy. Even without collision, such co-existence of technologies and awareness brings trauma and tension to every living person. Our most ordinary and conventional atti-

tudes seem suddenly twisted into gargoyles and grotesques. Familiar institutions and associations seem at times menacing and malignant."⁴⁷

If *The Gutenberg Galaxy* stood as McLuhan's history of the disturbances ensuing from literacy and print, *Understanding Media* (1964) was his educational guide for easing the psychic conversion into the new age. In fact, the book first appeared as a mimeographed report, commissioned by the U.S. Office of Education, on how to teach the effects of media in secondary schools. It is the work that made McLuhan a household name and stirred the greatest controversy both in and outside of the schools. It is also his least substantial and most dated book. Its subtitle, "The Extensions of Man," reflects the increasing importance McLuhan placed on his psychology as well as on his role as a pioneering scientist.

According to McLuhan, the new electric technology is "organic and non-mechanical in tendency because it extends, not our eyes, but our central nervous systems as a planetary venture." He was by no means the first to employ the analogy between media and the central nervous system. While seeking a government subsidy for his research in electromagnetic telegraphy in 1838, Samuel Morse wrote in terms that uncannily presaged McLuhan. Six years before the completion of the first American telegraph line, Morse thought it not too visionary "to suppose that it would not be long ere the whole surface of this country would be channelled for those nerves which are to diffuse, with the speed of thought, a knowledge of all that is occurring throughout the land; making, in fact, one neighborhood of the whole country."⁴⁸ But McLuhan elevated this metaphor into a psychological and biological principle at the center of a rigid technological determinism.

The effects of media technology occur not on the conscious level of opinion and concepts, but on the subliminal level of sense ratios and patterns of perception. His famous phrase, "the medium is the message," refers to the change in scale or pace or pattern that any extension of communications technology introduces into human affairs. Each extension, however, brings with it a numbness or narcotizing effect that blinds people to its real meaning. McLuhan claimed, "I am in the position of Louis Pasteur telling doctors that their greatest enemy was quite invisible, and quite unrecognized by them. Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind."⁴⁹

McLuhan repeatedly referred to the “numbness,” “trance,” “subliminal state,” “somnambulism,” and “narcosis” induced by the new electronic media. He attached great significance to the Greek myth of Narcissus, just as Freud placed the myth of Oedipus at the center of his psychology. The “Narcissus narcosis” parallels Freudian repression, serving as self-protecting numbing or anesthetizing of the central nervous system.

The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person. This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perception until he became the servo-mechanism of his own extended or repeated image. . . . Any invention or technology is an extension or self-amputation of our physical bodies, and such extensions also demand new ratios or new equilibriums among other organs and extensions of the body. . . . To behold, use, or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological form is necessarily to embrace it. To listen to radio or to read the printed page is to accept these extensions of ourselves into our own personal system and to undergo the “closure” or displacement that follows automatically. It is this continuous embrace of our technology in daily use that puts us in the Narcissus role of subliminal awareness and numbness in relation to these images of ourselves. By continually embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servo-mechanisms. That is why we must, to use them at all, serve these objects, these extensions of ourselves, as gods or minor religions.⁵⁰

McLuhan embraced a species of determinism that might be labeled *technological naturalism*. He argued that in his normal use of technology, man is perpetually physiologically modified by his own inventions. “Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world, as the bee of the plant world, enabling it to fecundate and to evolve ever new forms. The machine world reciprocates man’s love by expediting his wishes and desires, namely, in providing him with wealth.”⁵¹ The new media are not bridges between man and nature; they *are* nature.

Technological naturalism is the ecological partner to McLuhan’s psychology. That is to say, he identified the changes associated with the new media as environmental and invisible to people in the way that water must be invisible to fish. Hence McLuhan’s insistence that he operated like a scientist, clinically detached for survival purposes: “One must begin by becoming extra-environmental, putting

oneself beyond the battle in order to study and understand the configuration of forces. It’s vital to adopt a position of arrogant superiority . . . without the detached involvement, I could never objectively observe media. . . . So I employ the greatest boon of literate culture: the power of man to act without reaction—the sort of specialization by dissociation that has been the driving motive force behind Western civilization.” There is a great irony here. McLuhan announces that electronic media portend a return to the “seamless web of tribal kinship in which all members of the group existed in harmony,” a richer and more passionate world than Gutenberg’s. Yet he must fervently invoke the potent image of scientist, the ultimate product of literacy, in order to legitimize himself.⁵²

There is a persistent strain as well between passive acceptance and the pragmatic urge to control. He argued that we are within conceivable range of a world automatically controlled to the point where we could say: “‘Six hours less radio in Indonesia next week or there will be a great falling off in literary attention.’ Or ‘We can program twenty more hours of TV in South Africa next week to cool down the tribal temperature raised by radio last week.’ Whole cultures could now be programmed to keep their emotional climate stable in the same way that we have begun to know something about maintaining equilibrium in the commercial economies of the world.” McLuhan simply tosses off objections to this monstrous vision as useless and distracting moralizing. “Computer technology can and doubtless will program entire environments to fulfill the social needs and sensory preferences of communities and nations. The *content* of that programming, however, depends on the nature of future societies—but that is in our own hands.”⁵³

Television is the crucial new communications medium in the retribalization process. It is a “cool” medium, by which McLuhan means that it has low definition and therefore demands greater participation on the part of its audience. Like other cool media, such as cartoons, hieroglyphics, and manuscripts, television requires the audience to complete the picture, to fill in the gaps. “Hot” media, such as photographs, prints, movies, and radio, extend one single sense in high definition, leaving little to be filled in. The television image is not a photo in the usual sense but a “ceaselessly forming contour of things limned by the scanning finger. The resulting plastic contour appears by light *through*, not light *on*, and the image so formed has the quality of sculpture and icon, rather than of picture. The TV image offers some three million dots per second to the receiver. From these he accepts only a few dozen each instant, from

which to make an image." Although McLuhan is correct in noting the difference between electromagnetic and film images, his argument is certainly not scientific. There is no evidence for his hypothesis; it is difficult to see any difference between the automatic, filling in of the television picture and the "persistence of vision" phenomenon that makes motion pictures possible. Each of these occurs automatically, without conscious thought by the viewer. In addition, the quality of the television image has improved enormously over the past fifteen years with color and the new solid-state and cable systems.

McLuhan's pseudoscientific description of television's sensory impact centered on the supposed tactility of the image. "The TV image requires each instant that we 'close' the spaces in the mesh by a convulsive sensuous participation that is profoundly kinetic and tactile, because tactility is the interplay of the senses, rather than the isolated contact of skin and object." For McLuhan, the sense of touch represented the sum of all human senses, the long lost *sensus communis* of the tribal man. Television is thus the practical means for recovering the shattered psychological unity in the modern world.⁵⁴

In the last analysis, McLuhan offered us a trick of vision, not a true social theory. Either one sees it or one does not. Formerly, only the artist could accurately foresee and comprehend the violent psychic changes accompanying new media technology. Today, the instant speed of electric information permits easy recognition of the patterns of change. The transcendental leap is now possible for all. "If adjustment (economic, social, or personal) to information movement at electronic speed is quite impossible, we can always change our models and metaphors of organization, and escape into sheer understanding. Sequential analysis and adjustment natural to low speed information movement becomes irrelevant and useless even at telegraph speed. But as speed increases, the understanding in all kinds of structures and situations becomes relatively simple."

McLuhan substituted mythology for history by ignoring or distorting the real historical and sociological factors that shaped media institutions. "It is instructive to follow the embryonic stages of any new [media] growth," he wrote, "for during this period of development it is much misunderstood."⁵⁵ In his role as mythmaker, McLuhan argued deterministically that our media of communication had to evolve the way they did. His technological naturalism made media biological rather than social extensions of man. Although he purported to trace the cultural development of man through communications media, his history is curiously devoid of real people.

The obsession with his own image as a clinically detached scientist stemmed from his need to exploit the prestige enjoyed by scientific explanation in the modern era. Behind the flashy scientism, McLuhan actually transformed the history of communication into a seductive allegorical narrative, which preaches that we must first submit before we can be saved.

The plain fact that so much of McLuhan's later works already seems dated reveals him as a distinctive phenomenon of the 1960s. He may very well be remembered more for his analyses of content than those of form, even though he has repudiated *The Mechanical Bride* as obsolete since television. The great attention given to the generation gap, youth revolt, and university protest in *Understanding Media* and the later picture books (*The Medium is the Massage*, *Counterblast*) seems particularly naive today. His enormous popularity no doubt accounted for the ferocity of some of the attacks made upon him by the literary and university establishments; he reserved his greatest scorn in interviews for the traditional literary critics.

His vogue and the reaction to it clearly met a need. The sixties will be remembered, among other things, as the decade in which television came of age as the dominant medium of communication. Television had saturated America by 1960, with at least one set in virtually every home. Daily national network news arrived in 1963. McLuhan both reflected and encouraged the growth of media awareness in American society. He also identified correctly the extremely incestuous trend among the media themselves; an extraordinarily high percentage of media content consists of items concerning other media forms. Today, all entertainment, news, political events, and advertising coexist equally as multimedia affairs.

Along the way to his popular breakthrough, however, McLuhan smoothed out any of the critical edges he had exhibited in his thinking. He certainly abandoned the critical context that had been so crucial in the work of his alleged mentor, Harold Innis. Stripped from the public McLuhan were any Innisian vestiges of moral and political concern with American media imperialism, Canadian resistance, the power of advertising, or the growing hegemony of space over time bias in Western culture. In his focus on the primacy of forms of transmission, McLuhan borrowed freely from Innis; but with McLuhan, Innis's despairing warnings about the direction of new communications technologies were transformed into a celebration of the "inevitable."

McLuhan's glorification of television slid very easily into an

apology for the corporate interests that controlled the medium. The McLuhan cult on Madison Avenue was very real in the sixties, as the advertising industry leaped to embrace a college professor who told ad men that they were creative artists. "People are looking all the time for an intellectual explanation of the work they are involved in," wrote one advertising executive in 1966. "They have for many years . . . revolted from the idea that advertising was mysterious, a sort of 'black art.' They wanted to know why and how it worked. I think in many ways McLuhan has had more to say for us to solve these problems than anybody previously."⁵⁶ McLuhan's frequent appearances on television helped turn him from knowledgeable sage into a mere pop idol grateful for the chance to glorify the medium giving him so much free exposure.

McLuhan's corporate multimedia newsletter, *Dew Line*, as well as his various consulting deals with advertising and media conglomerates, made it hard to swallow his continual public stance that he *personally* abhorred the changes he described. Yet one need not accept his personal mythology or his ties with the corporate world to acknowledge his contribution to a general shift in perception in American culture.

McLuhan's impact ought to be set in the context of the broader trend toward synchronic analyses of language, communication, myth, and expressive forms of all types. The post-World War II intellectual breakthroughs in structural anthropology, linguistics, and semiotics⁵⁷ all had certain affinities with the New Critical literary tradition in which McLuhan had originally been trained. Indeed, McLuhan himself may be viewed as a "medium" who popularized these approaches by applying their techniques to the analysis of American media fare. He made these esoteric disciplines relevant to the public imagination; in the process, he greatly enlarged the range of "legitimate" areas for cultural study.

McLuhan's penchant for exaggeration and outrage, for the pun and the probe, no doubt detracted from his status as a serious social theorist. The man who once appeared as a learned, obsessed, and even inspired prophet succeeded in getting just enough of his message across to be reduced to just another entertainer. His recent death made front-page news, putting him once again in the media spotlight from which he had receded. But the obituaries generally treated him as a quaint oddity from the mythological sixties, the quintessential product and creator of that media-haunted decade.

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MEDIA

AND THE AMERICAN MIND
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