

Technologies of Communication and the Canadian State

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Technologies of Communication and the Canadian State

BOTH OPTIMISM AND ANXIETY have greeted the historical advent of telephone, film, radio, television and the Internet. Advocates of each of these new technologies of communication promised that they would be a force for the education and enlightenment of the public and a boon to business. Critics argued that mass communications would debase culture and that the lack of privacy limited the business potential of the new technologies. In practice, the technologies developed in ways that disappointed the most sanguine technophiles and failed to justify the more irrational of the fears of the technophobes. This underlines the fact that technology is not an independent force that determines the shape of our lives. It is the social organization of technology that structures our life at work and leisure. The accomplishments and limitations of communications technologies developed as they did because each technology was integrated into existing social relations. Despite the insights of semiotics and the temptations of technological determinism, a political economy approach continues to be an effective tool in dissecting the development of communications.

The second means of electronic communication to be developed, after the telegraph, was the telephone, and the hype around the telephone was strikingly similar to the recent optimism about the arrival of the Internet. There is a tendency among technophobes and technophiles alike to fall into the trap of assuming that technology determines society rather than to recognize that the social organization of technology is something that people create. Robert E. Babe, *Telecommunications in Canada: Technology, Industry, and Government* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990) aims to demonstrate how government policy, and, more importantly, the business practices of Bell Telephone shaped the development of communications technologies from the telegraph to the Internet. People in the industry have long maintained that monopolistic conditions grew out of the need for technological standardization and the need to serve economically unremunerative markets. Babe rejects the deterministic assumption that the nature of the technology led to the creation of media monopolies, and he condemns the view that we have no choice but to accept the effects of new technologies. Bell's monopolization of telephone communications in Canada prior to the "deregulation" of the telephone industry, he argues, was the result of Bell's predatory business practices and the state's failure to regulate the company's activities. It was not a "natural" (read desirable) tendency of the technology. Corporate reorganization and creative accounting methods were just two of the tools used by Bell to prevent competition, evade the law and milk the monopoly cash cow. The federal regulators have been too willing, in Babe's view, to accept the self-serving arguments of Bell that what is best for Bell must be accepted as an inevitable effect of the technology. When the Canadian Radio and Television Commission did

belatedly try to establish some control over Bell, a process that Babe himself played a small role in, it was overruled by the federal cabinet. Babe's anger is apparent as he relates how Canadian telephone subscribers have unwillingly underwritten the creation of an international consortium of immense power that is responsible to no one but Bell's shareholders.

The most recent manifestation of this failure to regulate for the public good is the assumption among policy-makers that Canadians must ride the crest of the wave of the "information economy" or be sucked under by the undertow. As Babe points out, genuflecting before technology means we are abrogating responsibility to set the terms under which the wealthy and powerful operate. Even "deregulation" is really only a way of re-regulating the operation of the economy so that some groups and people benefit more than others. While technology companies ask the state to stop interfering in their business and give them a free hand to compete in the global environment, their attitude toward state regulation would change quickly if the law were to change and these companies no longer were, for example, to enjoy patent protection for their products.

While Bell might seem almost omnipotent in Babe's treatment, the company's subscribers and workers did influence the form of the telephone's social impact. Michèle Martin, *"Hello, Central?" Gender, Technology, and Culture in the Formation of Telephone Systems* (Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991) examines the social structure of telephone use in Ontario and Quebec during the first few decades of the new technology. Martin argues that in an industrial capitalist society new technologies are adapted to the needs of the male members of the capitalist class first, and that alternative uses of the technology by women and the working-class take the character of resistance. The first of these conclusions follows logically from the evidence, while the case for "resistance" seems weaker. Thus, in Martin's view, Bell Telephone designed a system to serve the needs of business, while working people went without telephone service, and alternative potential uses of the telephone were ignored. In the design of the telephone system, privacy was privileged over access because this enhanced the accumulation of capital. Capitalists needed confidential point-to-point communication if the telephone were to be used as a tool to conduct business. When workers and the wives of businessmen had access to phones, they used the technology in ways not imagined by the company. For instance, they experimented with the "broadcast" of music over the telephone line in which many subscribers listened to the one transmission, and they held "collective calls" in which a number of people traded information and companionship over the line. Bell worked hard to extinguish this use, only to market the same thing to businessmen under the name "conference calls" almost a century later. Martin denies that the nature of technology determines its use, and she insists that cultural and ideological forces influence the way the technology is used.

Martin is particularly concerned to show that women used the technology in "social" ways, rather than for the business purposes which the company intended. In this manner, women influenced the impact of the technology on culture and society. She examines the historical experience of telephone operators, who mediated between subscribers and the new technology, thus setting the pattern for how it was used. Martin notes several related reasons why telephone companies hired young lower-middle-class women as operators to replace the young men who had first done the job.

Unmarried women who lived with their parents could be paid less than a living wage and still be easy to regiment, while their equally poorly paid male counterparts were more likely to quit or rebel against strict behavioural codes. The polite and subservient culture of these late Victorian women set the standard for the “telephone etiquette” that Bell hoped to establish among its business clientele. However, this is more compelling as evidence of business using and profiting from class and gender roles, than as evidence of women’s resistance to regimentation.

The form that communications through wires took was well established when the wireless technology of radio broadcasting was invented. While the telephone developed mainly as a technology of point-to-point communication, radio went well beyond this and developed a system of broadcasting with one site transmitting education and entertainment to many receivers. In *Listening In: The First Decade of Canadian Broadcasting, 1922-1932* (Kingston and Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992) Mary Vipond has reevaluated the first decade of Canadian broadcasting, which until recently had been studied more as a case study in public policy than as a chapter in the history of broadcasting itself. She points out that, unlike the situation in the United States, in the 1920s and 1930s Canadian broadcasters lacked the capital necessary to continue to expand their facilities in the face of greater costs. This prevented the emergence of a privately-owned Canadian network such as the National Broadcasting Company in the United States, which benefited from its parent company, RCA, which owned the patents to all of the significant components of radio technology. Many commentators at the time believed that radio, like telephone technology, “naturally” led to a monopoly, and thus Canada faced the choice of whether broadcasting was going to be owned by “the state or the United States”.

Within the framework of this belief the Canadian state invested in the industry to ensure a Canadian presence, but Vipond also makes a compelling case for not overstating the radical nature of the 1929 Royal Commission on Broadcasting (the Aird Commission). Aird and the lobbying group, the Canadian Radio League, are generally credited with having spurred the development of public broadcasting in Canada in a move of defensive expansionism. Though it advocated broadcasting be used for national goals, the Aird Report did not preclude advertising, commercial broadcasting or the rebroadcast of American and British programming. Vipond suggests that the development of a group of private broadcasters who wanted to protect their interests, and the growth of large numbers of Canadians who listened to American broadcasters, both worked to circumscribe the power of the state to redesign broadcasting. In other words, the existence of American broadcasting created an audience in Canada that demanded certain forms of programming from Canadian sources. Meanwhile, Canadian station owners feared losing their investment if broadcasting were “nationalized”, and Canadian manufacturers wanted to maintain access to advertising. The Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission mimicked the innovations of American commercial broadcasters and ensured that Canadian manufacturers had an opportunity to advertise on the radio. Neither the nature of the electromagnetic spectrum nor the characteristics of radio technology determined the form of the broadcasting industry in Canada. That was shaped by a complex interplay of vested interests and cultural practices. Vipond has given us a convincing and sophisticated account of the material and ideological conditions within which

broadcasting evolved.

An even more revisionist view is offered by Marc Raboy, who challenges the nationalist dogma promoted by the “national broadcaster”. In *Missed Opportunities: The Story of Canada’s Broadcasting Policy* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990) Raboy insists upon the difference between a genuine *public* radio and *state* radio. While Graham Spry and the Canadian Radio League campaigned for a “public” broadcasting that would reflect the diverse ethnic, regional and class communities in Canada, Raboy argues that the government created instead an administrative apparatus that served the interests of the state rather than the “public”. This is a useful distinction that all historians should make, especially in a country where the term “public broadcasting” is used without reflection as a synonym for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. As Raboy observes:

broadcasting policy in Canada has been made to serve the broader political agenda of the state as its priorities change from time to time - one day the need for national unity in the face of perceived threats of external or internal adversity, the next day the promotion of economic development of local capitalist industry, the following day dealing with social pressures and demands for a more equitable distribution of wealth and resources (pp. xii-xiii).

He then points out that Canadian policy-makers could conceive of only two possible systems. The first was an American-style commercial “mass” media, and the second was a state-sponsored propaganda apparatus along the lines of the British Broadcasting Corporation. What both these alternative systems shared was the goal of a central authority shaping the desires and aspirations of “the masses”. Commercial radio sells products and state radio sells the political and social status quo. The Canadian government met the needs of the business community by allowing commercial broadcasting to continue and created a state-owned national network to serve “national” interests. Perhaps the fact that Raboy lives and works in Quebec partially explains his resistance to the idea that “national” institutions naturally are in the best interest of the publics that make up Canada. His analysis also helps to explain the erosion of the government’s commitment to the CBC. Once the ideological terrain had shifted in the 1980s, the government no longer viewed the maintenance of a state-owned broadcaster as essential to the role of ensuring the conditions under which capital accumulation could continue.

In an astute judgement, both Raboy and Vipond conclude that the Canadian government never did choose between public and private broadcasting. The Broadcasting Act of 1932 created a compromise that satisfied both the “nationalist” interests of the state and the commercial interests of Canadian businesses. This compromise, rather than technological inevitability, created the form of Canadian broadcasting.

Raboy is most interested in the conceptions of broadcasting that existed on the margins of the political debate.¹ Those interested in delving more deeply into the debates that were at the heart of policy-making might profitably consult Roger Bird,

ed., *Documents of Canadian Broadcasting* (Ottawa, Carleton University Press, 1988). This volume surveys the regulatory history of broadcasting from the birth of radio to the 1980s. The editor has collected and introduced many of the key texts that made up the debates over the form of broadcasting in Canada. With an eye to the usefulness of the volume, Bird has included many documents that the student or researcher might have difficulty locating while omitting other records that are easier to lay one's hands upon. Given its nature, it is most useful if one is interested in questions of policy and less so if one is examining the nature of day to day broadcasting as it was practised. No one will be likely to read this volume, but its chronological organization and detailed introductions make it a useful reference source.

While Canadians pioneered both telephone and radio technologies (Alexander Graham Bell and Reginald Fessenden respectively) and a large Canadian industry developed around each of these technologies, this was not the case with the visual communications technology of film. Ted Magder's *Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993) is a fruitful study of the political economy of cultural industries. Magder asks a familiar question in a new way. Why does Canada not have a film industry that can stand on its feet and compete with Hollywood? The fact that this book is published as a part of the "State and Economic Life" series provides a hint to the answer. Canada has a branch plant film industry in which Hollywood films are made in Canada by Americans for the same economic and political reasons that so many of our other industries are dominated by foreign capital.

Rather than blame the Canadian state for failing to support a Canadian film-making industry, Magder asks why there was no Canadian industry or lobbying group, like the Canadian Radio League, pressuring the state for protection. As he points out, at a time when "private enterprise" in Canada was not producing films, the Canadian state was promoting its own non-fiction films as a tool for public policy. But in the period before Hollywood established its preeminence, Canada lacked feature film producers who might have later asked for protection from predatory American commercial practices. The logic of capitalism is that capital flows to where entrepreneurs believe the highest rate of return will be realized. There was no Canadian industry because Canadian business owners chose to distribute and display American films, rather than risk capital on producing their own. In no sense can that decision be considered a failure, even if it does disappoint nationalists. The Canadian business community realised that, in the words of one commentator that Magder quotes, "the profits of the Motion Picture industry in Canada are in the running of theatres and not in the making and distribution of Motion Pictures" (p. 41). Canadian capital accommodated itself to its southern partners and retailed American products. Magder argues that it could have been otherwise. The Canadian state was aware of the monopolistic practices of film distributors, and it might have reacted to them as it did to similar commercialism and American domination of radio broadcasting, by a public broadcasting corporation.

1 Raboy would like to construct a democratic radio in which subordinate classes and communities are able to produce content as well as consume it. Within the constraints posed by the capitalist society, it is difficult to imagine the form of the broadcasting "industry" that evolved having been very different. For an interesting collection of essays on this theme see Raboy and Peter Bruck, eds., *Communication For and Against Democracy* (Montreal, 1989).

Perhaps the reason the state treated movies as mere entertainment while treating broadcasting as a tool for public enlightenment is that movies evolved out of the theatre, with all of its working-class roughness, while radio listening took place within the home among the middle-class families who could afford radio receivers.

Ultimately, in the 1970s, the Canadian state took a more aggressive role in encouraging the production of Canadian feature films because it was an industry in which Canada had a balance of trade deficit. Magder suggests that had the state tried to support private Canadian film-makers through exhibition quotas, it would have faced opposition in three areas. Such moves would have offended the businesses involved in retailing the Hollywood product, the audiences which liked the American product and the provinces jealous of the federal government moving into an area of their jurisdiction. The state did provide limited capital to subsidize Canadian production, because this did not threaten anyone's interests. But this programme was both a cultural and economic failure. Since the Canadian market was so small, the obvious tactic was to make films that were indistinguishable from the American product and could thus be exported. Since Canadians grew up on Hollywood, these films usually also conformed to what Canadians expected a movie to be. This helps to explain why the Canadian state is satisfied with Hollywood spending money on this side of the border (a result of a low Canadian dollar making production costs competitive) and does not bat an eye when producers place American licence plates on the cars so the American audience will be comfortable. There are currently many Hollywood movies and American network television programs being produced in Canada, because the economics of working in Canada is favourable and the paucity of distinctively Canadian material culture means that an entertainment product can be produced which is acceptable to the culturally chauvinistic Americans.

Magder convincingly argues that the state has wanted a Canadian movie industry for its economic benefits, but has not been committed to encouraging Canadian films that would engage in a Canadian culture. Support from government agencies such as the Canadian Film Development Corporation and Telefilm has encouraged the production of a few movies. The CFDC foundered in part because of the unresolved tension between the goal of creating an industry founded on market principles and the desire to promote a cultural agenda. Moreover, the state has been unwilling to challenge the domination of distribution enjoyed by multinational corporations based in Hollywood. Ironically, American antitrust legislation prevented the American corporations from monopolizing distribution in the United States as they do in Canada. The Canadian industry of which we currently hear so much could evaporate quickly if the economics of the industry were to change. While this branch plant movie and television industry lasts, it satisfies the desire for employment and economic spin-off, but making American movies in Canada cannot satisfy those who want to promote a Canadian culture.

After the movies, the next communications medium to achieve historical significance was television. Television broadcasting "naturally" assumed the forms of radio broadcasting, out of which it had grown. Paul Rutherford, *When Television Was Young: Primetime Canada, 1952-1967* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994) is a detailed study of Canadian television during its "golden age". This was a period of "tele-radio" during which radio broadcasters were slowly adapting to the needs and capabilities of a visual medium. When Hollywood brought its visual expertise into

American television, it created an entertainment product that was popular on both sides of the border. As was the case with film, Canadian commercial broadcasters made more money importing American products than making their own. And the CBC failed to create an entertainment product that could compete for the audience, in Rutherford's view, thanks in part to an ossified management. Despite these limitations, the author finds much to admire in satirists such as Wayne and Shuster who provided subversive commentary on society and the media.

Rutherford is even-handed in his judgement of this technology. He sees television as neither the positive force creating a global village imagined by Marshall McLuhan, nor the destructive agent its critics have always feared. The author is methodical in his treatment of the expectations of the new technology and the institutional history of the CBC and to a lesser extent CTV, and in his content analysis of programming and discussion of the effect that television has had upon viewers. He concludes that programming simultaneously bolsters and undermines political power, sexual roles and other aspects of our social order. While it can set our public agenda and give meaning to symbolic icons that reinforce the community, it can also demystify our leaders and hasten change. The way that viewers use television, and radio to a greater extent, as background noise or visual wallpaper while they go about their lives, also mutes the impact of the tube.

Rutherford's view of television's limited impact may soothe some critics of the medium, but in many Canadian nationalists' view, the cost of not having an authentic Canadian television culture is equated with the destruction of Canada. Such views beg many questions however. Richard Collins, *Culture, Communication and National Identity: The Case of Canadian Television* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990) raises the issue of what an authentic Canadian culture would be. Collins points out that despite the free-market ideology espoused by New York and Hollywood, the entertainment "market" is not free, since Americans are intolerant to products that are not indistinguishable from their own. For Canadians to compete against the economy of scale and vertical integration of Hollywood, they must make "American" programmes. Any self-conscious Canadian programme would be a commercial failure and satisfy only the self-styled nationalist elite. As Magder argued in the case of film, Collins demonstrates that Canadian television broadcasters can earn higher profit at less risk by retailing American products than by producing their own.

This book has as its central concern the assumption among nationalists that political sovereignty requires cultural sovereignty. Collins tests this proposition by studying the political economy of television and analyzing the content of selected Canadian television dramas. He concludes that it is possible for a country to retain a healthy political independence while at the same time consuming almost exclusively the television entertainment of another country. Collins concurs with Rutherford in pointing out that Canadians continue to watch their own news and public affairs programming in large numbers even if their taste in entertainment is American. This suggests that Canada is not a nation, but a state, and that it does not need a nationalist cultural intelligentsia to maintain a vibrant political life. This is a conclusion that is guaranteed to anger the Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, who have attempted to use a nationalist appeal to convince the government to maintain funding to "public" broadcasting. As Raboy demonstrated, this appeal has been ineffective since the state's priorities shifted in the 1980s. Along the way, Collins examines the staples

approach, dependency theory, Pierre Trudeau's desire to create a post-national country, Canadian literary mythologies and other issues. The result is a book that ranges more widely than its title suggests. Collins makes a valuable observation when he points out that the nationalist reaction to American commercialism leads to centralized broadcasting, while the desire for "public" broadcasting is a decentralized reaction to that same commercialism. Unfortunately the recent experience proves that as the state cuts the CBC's budget, the regional productions are the first to suffer and the English-language programming agenda is increasingly set by Toronto.

Although most of these volumes started with a political economy approach, Collins and Rutherford have also borrowed from literary theory in an attempt to deal with the issue of what meaning the consumers of the messages construct. After studying the "golden age" of television Paul Rutherford has also given us a study of television commercials that attempts to "read" them from a critical perspective in *The New Icons?: The Art of Television Advertising* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994). This book attempts, more explicitly than the volumes treated above, to gain from the insights of semiotics. The author proposes that commercials are "icons" that promote consumption in a way similar to the medieval icons that adorned the walls of churches in order to promote worship of saints.

Rutherford finds that television commercials all over the world share "a common repertoire of designs, images and sounds" (p. 205). Despite religious, linguistic and other differences between the peoples of the world, commercials supplement cultures with a common set of motifs and symbols. Advertisers throughout the world, Rutherford implies, try to fill the gaps in our lives with attributes that their commercials assign to the products. A perfume makes us desirable, a beer enhances our popularity, a car allows us to retreat into a technological womb in which we have comfort and control over the outside world. It is worth adding that the goal of advertising is to make these ethnic and class differences subordinate to our relationship to business — that of consumers. The message of advertising, as Michael Schudson pointed out, is that we should satisfy our human needs through consumption.² Rutherford's treatment is not founded on such material considerations; he is more concerned with the interplay of the signified and the signifier.

All of these technologies — the telephone, film, radio, television and, most recently, the Internet — have been greeted with unrealistic expectations and unfair disdain. While each was hyped as a tool for the education, enlightenment and entertainment of citizens, any fair assessment would have to find their effects have been mixed. Critics on both the left and the right have often pointed out the failure of technological development to live up to its potential. Critics on the left have argued that commercial considerations prevented the media from fostering education and genuine democracy. Conservatives have lamented the appeal to the lowest common denominator and the failure of popular culture to live up to the standards of elite culture. Nationalist Canadians have seen American corporations' use of the media as a threat to the existence of Canada. As long as men such as Graham Spry held influence, the state could be counted upon to support elite uses of the technologies in

2 Michael Schudson, *Advertising, The Uneasy Persuasion: Its Dubious Impact on American Society* (New York, 1984).

the name of “public” service, but that is no longer the case in the 1990s.

These volumes show us that the Canadian intellectual tradition of political economy and the practice of critical scholarship still have much to show us. Not the least significant of the conclusions that can be drawn from these studies is that the triumph of the free market ideology has helped ensure that communications technologies primarily serve those with power. But there is reason for optimism, as they also show that monopolistic and commercial hegemonic practices are social constructions, rather than the inevitable products of the technology.

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