

**Western University**

---

**From the Selected Works of Paul W Nesbitt-Larking**

---

2010

# Politics and the Media: Culture, Technology, and Regulation

Paul W Nesbitt-Larking  
Jonathan Rose



THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

.....

# CANADIAN POLITICS

.....

*Edited by*

JOHN C. COURTNEY  
DAVID E. SMITH

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

rd ed. New York:

s for public  
ada: *Essays in Honour of*  
d Jeffrey S. Steeves,

cracy: An oxymoron if  
is and Grace Skogstad,

ities. Toronto: McGraw-

tions among consenting  
ations in *Canada Today*,  
nistration of Canada.  
er: University of British

ntation and policy  
al of *Political Science*

public expenditure in  
-689.  
nd *Swings* (*Transforming*

95. Dynamic  
i5.  
elegation and  
Wolfgang Muller, and

Toronto: Macmillan.  
. New York: Russell Sage

n, Ont.: McGill-Queens

of the *Federation*, 1990.  
niversity.

f preferences for  
).

; on defense. *British*

ences and policy. *Journal*

most important

etween public opinion  
ell Dalton and Hans-

## CHAPTER 16

# POLITICS AND THE MEDIA: CULTURE, TECHNOLOGY, AND REGULATION

JONATHAN ROSE  
PAUL NESBITT-LARKING

WHETHER from the perspective of Canadian media theory or from historical developments of politics and the media in Canada, the Canadian experience can be expressed as a series of dialectical tensions related to particular patterns of socioeconomic and political evolution. Although the dualities anchoring each term in these tensions are familiar to the point of cliché, they remain vital to understanding the relationship between power and representation in Canada: metropolis and hinterland, civilization and nature, garrison and wilderness, individualism and communitarianism, freedom and order, space and time, cool and hot, technology and humanist ethics. Each of these dualities reflects the tensions in communication that are constitutive of Canada itself. In most polities, communications, including the media, are regarded as forces that exert an impact on citizens. In Canada, communications are intrinsic to the very construction and reproduction of Canada itself and to the very possibility of Canada. It is largely for this reason that, among the social sciences, communications and media theory stand as Canada's most distinctive and profound contributions. The analysis of communication is not just important; it is largely through the analysis of communication that understanding Canada itself becomes possible.

In the next section, we present the familiar dialectics of Canadian communication that have deep roots in Canadian media theory. Then, in the following sections



we explore how they have given shape to, respectively, the political economies, regulatory regimes, and dominant ideas that characterize politics and the media in Canada. In the current era of new information and communications technologies (ICTs), our final section explores not merely the globalization of the Canadian media, but also how the Canadian media experience is becoming more universal.

## CANADIAN MEDIA THEORY: TRADITION AND LEGACY

---

Canadian scholars have played a significant role in the development of media theory and have contributed much to the way scholars everywhere think about the media. This section examines three thinkers who have exerted a significant impact on our understanding of the media: Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis, and Dallas Smythe. According to Babe (2000b) these writers are part of the core of what he terms the “quintessentially Canadian” contribution to communication studies. They are significant in that each has changed conventional understandings of the media. McLuhan, the originator of the expression “the medium is the message,” is likely the best known of these three. He believes that the importance of the media message lies less in its content than in its form. Innis’s work, which transcends economics, history, and communications, takes the form of a lifelong treatise into the nature of empire. His work on communication traces the space and time biases of media that have facilitated the growth of empire (space) or acted to buttress the sacred, the traditional, and the local (time). Dallas Smythe’s critical work on the role and functions of the corporate media subverts traditional notions of the audience as a consumer of the media and posits the audience instead as a commodity for sale.

Appropriately for a professor of English, Marshall McLuhan uses the playfulness of the English language to make his arguments. His aphorisms rely on tropes such as metaphor or chiasmus. McLuhan understands communication metaphorically as an extension of humans, arguing that the electronic media extend our central nervous systems and, most famously, that in the television age our world becomes a global village. The media are not merely carriers of information, but, more important, are vehicles that change humanity through modes of interaction with them. A newspaper is less interesting for its content than for the way its technological form conditions its readers. McLuhan writes that people do not actually read papers, they step into them like a hot bath (McLuhan as cited in Knowles 1998, 201). According to Babe (2000b), McLuhan also uses chiasmus to great effect. It is a figure of speech where two clauses are repeated but inverted, as in Kennedy’s “ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.” Chiasmus allows McLuhan to assert rhetorically that virtue could become a vice, and that electronic media result in an implosion of information instead of explosion. Challenging us to “flip” our notions of cause and



effect, McLuhan argues that the electronic media no longer extend the range of empire, but rather negate existing centers of power (Babe 2000b).

McLuhan's aphorism that the medium is the message prompts us to regard as important not what is written in a newspaper or viewed on television, but rather the effect that our engagement with these media has upon us. Literate cultures that rely on linear texts will generate different practices and values than cultures that rely on visual images, or preliterate cultures that depend on oral communication. In a telling and pertinent critique, McLuhan wrote that "political scientists have been quite unaware of the effects of the media anywhere at any time simply because nobody has been willing to study the personal and social effects of media apart from their 'content'" (McLuhan 1966, 328).

In conceptualizing categories of "hot" and "cool" media, McLuhan set in place a dialectical model of how media "work us over" (McLuhan 1967, 26). His metaphor of the temperature of media can be understood as measuring degrees of participation as well as degrees of information. Hot media are characterized by a dominant sense (such as aural or visual) and are "high definition" or information rich. Rather than engage us, they condition and direct us. Cool media engage several senses, are "low definition" or lacking in information, and require the active participation of the audience.

Although the application of McLuhan's work to Canadian political science remains underdeveloped, its orientation and its insights might be brought to bear on certain critical research questions. McLuhan's concept of the global village sensitizes us to the simultaneous and apparently contradictory forces of universalist dissemination and particularist retrenchment that have characterized the spread of global communications in recent decades. McLuhan's theory that any new technoculture enhances, obsolesces, retrieves, and reverses existing technological practices is able to enlighten our consideration of emerging new technologies as they affect the political process. Nowhere is McLuhan more relevant today than in the analysis of politics and the Internet.

McLuhan was greatly influenced by the writings of Harold Innis, whose expansive thoughts on technology, media, and the impact of communications in creating empire make him one of the most significant historians of media technology. In *The Bias of Communication*, Innis (1971) points out that technology itself can be a medium (Babe 2000a, 71). Communication technologies are situated between two poles: those that are biased toward space and those that have a bias toward time. Space-biased communication is information that is easily mobile and therefore allows for the expansion of empire and control, but, as a result of this, lacks permanence and is more transient than time-biased communication. Time-biased communication is that which emphasizes continuity and tradition and, although durable, is inflexible and immobile and therefore makes state expansion more difficult. Time-biased cultures privilege the oral over the written and are therefore confined by geography and the distinctiveness of language or dialect that makes them more parochial.

According to Innis (1971), the contemporary world has evolved in a highly space-biased direction as a result of the historical succession of a series of empires.



There is less regard for oral tradition or continuity with the past and we are more linear, more rational, and bureaucratic than in the world of antiquity. If time-biased cultures are marked by their slow adaptability, space-biased cultures are so adaptable that permanence is eschewed for continual change and planned obsolescence. As for the effects of media, this means the sources of information are mobile and multiple, and are able to break down the barriers of space; they are also ephemeral and "thin" in cultural terms.

Media, for Innis, are technologies that synthesize human intentions in communication with available material resources and, through a process of transformation, give life to cultures and discourses. These media go on to assume a dominant monopolistic position in a society, shaping its interests and concerns in the media's own form. The interests of society become the interests of the media, and those interests are determined by their space or time bias. For Innis, Canada itself is a technological miracle, an ostensibly absurd artificial creation—a quasi-autonomous and privileged outpost—necessitated by the exigencies of empire, space, and capitalism despite the traditions of Aboriginal and early-settler cultures of time and tradition. The continuing tension between time and space is integral to the Canadian experience (Nesbitt-Larking 2007, 191). In the current era of globalization, in which imperialist hegemonies encounter global counterhegemonies of resistance, the ambivalent character of the Canadian experience is emerging as increasingly relevant to global politics. Innis's model establishes the complexities of space and time, and thereby opens up the exploration of how it is possible for the strategic spatial spread of bureaucratic global empires to be undermined by tactical maneuvers from the time-biased, sacred, and traditional interstices and margins.

If Innis and McLuhan regard the media of communications as conditioning cultures and ideologies, Dallas Smythe adopts a more materialistic approach, and argues that the media are principally in the business of selling audiences to advertisers. For Smythe (1981, 233), the audience commodity is the most important product of the mass media. In his radical view of media, Smythe explains that audiences are engaged in work on behalf of advertisers. The "work" of the audience is the task of training themselves through media exposure to be good consumers. The free lunch (Smythe 1977, 5) or inducement that audiences get consists of the programs that broadcasters produce to attract audiences to advertisements and thereby deliver them to advertisers. For Smythe (1978, 124) the free lunch of "stories, stars, songs and films are passed from one to another medium and there cross-blended with the dictates of advertisers." Advertisers are willing to "buy the services of audiences with predictable specifications who will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times to particular means of communication (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines)" (Smythe 1977, 4).

For Smythe, the media create audiences that are socialized to be consumers and therefore conditioned to believe in the sanctity of private property, the capitalist system, and a limited role of government. Second, the media produce consumers who define themselves by what they own, and respect the highly profitable large corporations. Smythe borrows C. B. Macpherson's (1975) theory of "possessive



more  
biased  
adapt-  
cence.  
e and  
them-

nmu-  
ation,  
inant  
edia's  
those  
lf is a  
mous  
capi-  
e and  
adian  
which  
, the  
rele-  
time,  
patial  
from

oning  
, and  
ertis-  
duct  
s are  
sk of  
unch  
that  
liver  
ongs  
n the  
with  
par-  
aga-

and  
alist  
ners  
arge  
sive

individualism" in explaining this culture of identity through ownership. Third, the media produce a quiescent public whose capacity to question the state is moderated by its consumerism. Smythe argues that the power to control information flows is the basis of political power in Canada (Babe 2000a, 137). Although Smythe is a materialist, he also recognizes that media are important agencies of socialization. Indeed, his work specifies that distinctive forms, genres, and channels operate to reproduce different audiences.

As with McLuhan's and Innis's ideas, Smythe's work is wide open to critique. Nonetheless, like them, he opens up lines of enquiry that are both highly useful in contemporary Canadian political analysis and are as yet underdeveloped. The political economy of "coping" that Smythe explains in detail in his work describes the role of the media, in collaboration with the state and the corporations, in nurturing and maintaining a credit economy in which consumers are encouraged to borrow against their own future and therefore the entire future of the capitalist system and are trapped in a personal world of anxious acquisitiveness that sets limits to their political consciousness. Of relevance today, Smythe's theory explains why websites are able to give away content for free. Like TV news programs, websites provide free content to create an audience to sell to advertisers. Smythe might say that websites are places for advertising banners and what they put around those banners (what we might call content) is less important than the ads.

## THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE CANADIAN MEDIA

As businesses, Canadian news and information media share in common the well-known characteristics of other enterprises in the era of rapid globalization. They are subject to growing pressures to accumulate, innovate, consolidate, and diversify in a transnational and increasingly liquid context. A major political consequence of these trends is to be found in the growing commodification of the news product, evident in shrinking and deskilled staffs, a growing dependency on the dominant wire services, an increasing resort to "pack journalism," the expansion of "infotainment" and tabloid reductionism, and the homogenization of the news genre. Such trends have been as apparent in Canada (Taras 1999) as they have in the United States (Bennett 2005). Mobility of capital has resulted in pressures toward deregulation that have opened up a range of technological and labor innovations based upon economies of scale, scope, and specialization. Flexible specialization in the labor process has resulted in the decline of the news media professional as cross-media synergies, technological convergences, and corporate conglomerations have blurred the boundaries between information and entertainment, news and opinion, and fact and fantasy. These dominant trends toward impoverished and generic news content have been further aggravated through perceptions of risk (Beck 1999)



as well as global moral panic conditioned by antiterrorist discourses. The impact of global economic forces is readily apparent in recent developments in Canadian media. Apart from increasing pressures on the Canadian federal and provincial states to deregulate and divest themselves of public-sector media, there has been increasing pressure on the federal state to relax regulations on foreign ownership of the Canadian media (Skinner and Gasher 2005). After decades of resistance to cross-media ownership, the federal government relented in 1996 with its Convergence Policy Statement (Canada, Industry Canada 2008) and, beginning in 2000, three major corporate takeovers rapidly reshaped the media landscape. CanWest Global, with holdings in broadcast media, purchased the Southam-Hollinger chain of newspapers; Bell Canada acquired CTV and the *Globe and Mail* newspaper; while newspaper giant Quebecor took over cable company Videotron, the *Sun* chain of newspapers, and the TVA television network (Nesbitt-Larking 2007, 100, 117; Skinner and Gasher 2005, 52). In the case of each of these convergences, the principal players made the argument that for media in Canada to survive in a hostile and competitive global media environment, they needed to be able to expand their enterprises and operate in a less regulated climate, even to the extent of establishing made-in-Canada oligopolies.

Despite the global forces of contemporary capitalism, media enterprises in Canada have emerged within the context of a unique political economy, and it is important to note the Canadian specificities. These continue to shape media enterprises in Canada today. Notable is the relationship with American economy and society. Canada's media policy throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was grounded in the ever-present reality that, because of the asymmetry of power, American culture and cultural products were so dominant within Canada that if Canadian federal and provincial states did nothing, they might become overwhelming. The liberal creed in the United States meant that it could adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude regarding culture and culture industries, including the media. The more strongly communitarian Canadian political values were necessary to meet the vast challenges of geography and ethnolinguistic divisions, and for the very existence of the country itself. These values, enshrined in public policies, survive in a complex web of foreign ownership regulations, media regulatory agencies, and a prominent public sector in broadcasting, reflecting Canada's distinctive political economy tradition.

An open and vibrant democracy thrives on the expression of diverse viewpoints and upon a serious and sustained public dialogue regarding matters of common concern. The importance of creating a vibrant civic forum was long ago recognized as an important element in democracy. The clearest exposition of this comes from Jürgen Habermas (1989), who writes about the importance of a public sphere where citizens can engage the state and each other in an informed manner. This exchange needs to be rooted in genuine conversation informed by good argumentation and bounded by a model of trust and reciprocity. In this ideal, the media can provide the equivalent of the Athenian *agora*—a place to talk, debate, and exchange ideas. Habermas believes that a shift from real to virtual communication, changing media ownership patterns, and the growing influence of advertisers have weakened this function.



Capitalism places the capacity to conduct those conversations and to express diverse views in the exclusive hands of private media owners. The 1981 Royal Commission on Newspapers (the Kent Commission) argued that "freedom of the press should continue to mean the freedom of the proprietor to do what he likes with his newspaper" (Canada 1981, 246), and yet also claimed that "freedom of the press is not a property right of owners. It is a right of the people" (Canada 1981, 1). Although Kent defended the principles of private enterprise and the narrow rights of owners, he also expressed support for a broader public interest in promoting dialogue and protecting the *agora*. The commission had been established in the aftermath of a huge and dramatic exchange of media properties between two media corporations, and the commission regarded with concern the impact of increased corporate concentration on the articulation of a diversity of viewpoints in the news media. Along with other cultural critics, the commission was concerned that as media organizations consolidated and became more oligopolistic, editorial quality would be compromised and sacrificed with a view to profit, accountability to audiences would be reduced, and the diversity of views expressed would become narrower. An oligopoly would not have to work so hard to attract and retain audiences and could remain profitable through the purchase of cheaper material to fill the news hole.

Canadian scholars had already considered that in a free market, the audience would not accept poor and declining editorial material and would seek alternative sources. This has become a vital question in the new millennium of major cross-media convergence and conglomerate takeovers in Canada. The consequences of these recent convergences have included slashed editorial staffs in newsrooms and the recycling of materials across various media. The new corporations have also taken to the mass circulation of highly opinionated editorializing from a small number of mostly conservative commentators and have largely abandoned local news and views. A small and demoralized skeleton news staff now operates in many newspapers across Canada and attempts to sustain the professionalism of its product while its labor process is increasingly deskilled. In this context, how have audiences responded?

A common response emerges from elite theorists. They argue that owners, often in collaboration with the state elites, impose their political wills through editorializing and sanctioned media texts. Media elites propagandize through their willful imposition of conservative and probusiness editorializing and biased news reporting. Such are the views of Chomsky and Herman (1988) and James Winter (2002) in Canada. Elites further their agenda through the production and distribution of mind-numbing distractions, infotainment, and cheap "gotcha" journalism that serve to entertain the masses and keep them from critical thinking and therefore political discontent. Audiences end up cynical, disillusioned, and depoliticized. David Taras (1999) regards with deep concern the trivialization of political and other media content in the Canadian media.

On a superficial level, citizens are exposed to a greater range of programming options than ever before. The Internet, online newspapers, and television programming provide a universe of news content unimaginable to our forefathers. On the other hand, this diversity has created what Taras (1999) calls "fragmentation



bombs”—that is, diverse channels speak to specific communities defined by gender, hobby, age, religion, or other category. Although there may be a multiplicity of news, many authors question the genuine diversity of viewpoints expressed.

In terms of corporate control, James Curran (2005) persuasively argues that in our current age of media conglomeration, where a few media outlets control print and electronic media, the likelihood of a press that is independent of corporate control is slim. In some cases, there is even active collusion between the press and government. Italy's Silvio Berlusconi is one such example. Using his own media empire to propel him to the office of prime minister, he then used them to back his government's legislation in support of his own private fortune. In the United States, Fox News has been a virtual adjunct of the Republican Party, being criticized as "rabid proponents of the president's position and going out of their way to crush any critical opposition to it" (McChesney and Hackett 2005, 241). In other cases, "nonaggression pacts" are made between government and media, as was the case between then-Prime Minister Tony Blair and Rupert Murdoch, the head of the largest media corporation in the United Kingdom (Curran 2005, 125).

A cursory scan of recent developments in the Canadian media reveals sufficient instances of deliberate actions by media elites to lend support to the theory. This includes the growing tendency for some high-profile Canadian journalists to abandon their role as supposedly independent political observers to become highly paid public relations practitioners for governments and cabinet ministers. Also relevant here is the highly publicized firing of *Ottawa Citizen* editor Russell Mills, by the Aspers, Canada's leading media magnates. In defiance of the Aspers, Mills had written an editorial critical of then-Prime Minister Chrétien. Despite the heavy-handed interventions of Conrad Black and the Aspers in their newsrooms (Shade 2005), more probing accounts of the political content and editorial style of the media go beyond these voluntaristic and instrumentalist explanations and establish how structures of ownership and control as well as regulatory frameworks and dominant discourses give daily shape to the media texts that are produced. This more critical approach to the media and politics is evidenced in the work of Mosco (1996) and Magder (1989, 284), who adopt more complex and nuanced structuralist approaches, and Hackett (1986), Dyer-Witheford (2005), and Clarke (2005), who insist on the capacity of audiences to reduce, refuse, and recycle media content.

## THE STATE AND REGULATION OF THE MEDIA IN CANADA

In any capitalist economy, the state is powerfully shaped by the workings of the market, both within its territorial borders and beyond. However, the state is always much more than a result of economic forces. Nowhere is this more evident than in



ender,  
news,  
  
hat in  
print  
orate  
s and  
media  
ck his  
states,  
ed as  
crush  
cases,  
e case  
e larg-  
  
icient  
: This  
aban-  
y paid  
evant  
y the  
writ-  
inded  
(2005),  
lia go  
how  
lomi-  
more  
(1996)  
ralist  
, who  
it.

.....  
  
of the  
lways  
an in

Canada, which from its earliest origins was a political society whose very characteristics were powerfully shaped and conditioned by its federal and provincial states. Nonetheless, globalization has called into question the apparent certainties of the modern (Westphalian) model of the nation-states everywhere, including Canada. Matters of sovereignty, legitimacy, boundaries, and citizenship are increasingly in question. The very boundaries between state and civil society are far less certain than they were in the past.

Into this complex world of the Canadian federal and provincial states and global politics, the media in Canada are situated in a regulatory environment that is somewhere between a state-centric past and an increasingly deregulated and globally flexible future. The background is best expressed in the comparable historical experiences of two waves of nation building: the national policy era of the 1870s and '80s, and the birth of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 1936 and the National Film Board (NFB) in 1939. More important, both eras were characterized by the strong federal state forging a pan-Canadian structure of communications to promote the very possibility of the Canadian nation. In the era of the national policy, the principal bonds of communication linking the prairies to central Canada were the railroads, grain elevators, and telegraph lines. In the era of the CBC and the NFB, the bonds of communication were the radio stations, traveling documentary film projectionists, and powerful radio transmitter stations, beaming Canadian content in relay across an enormous and sparse landmass. Each of these eras of nation building can be characterized by the dominance of the Canadian state as sponsor and builder of the communications infrastructure in an interventionist, paternalistic, and cautious manner. The tenor of the role of the state in promoting and preserving Canadian communications, including the media, is evident in various commissions and documents that reveal the vision of a succession of political and corporate leaders, from the Aird Report of 1928 to the Report of the Parliamentary Committee on Canadian Heritage, *Our Cultural Sovereignty* (Canada 2003). The existence and continuity of Canada could never be taken for granted. In terms of its geopolitics, Canada was and continues to be an act of will in which the state played a key role in forging bonds of communication across the vast expanses of inhospitable emptiness. To become a political reality, Canada needed to break from Britain and to avoid the almost overwhelming pressures to become an annex of the United States. Much of the character of media regulation, and the consequent structure and content of the Canadian media themselves, is the result of the constant need to counter the powerful political, economic, and cultural presence of the United States. The existence of a viable public media in Canada and the framework of regulations designed to protect Canadian ownership, talent, and content in the media are a consequence of the American presence.

Although it is becoming increasingly difficult to declare in any definitive way the boundaries of the state, and although it has always been a challenge to discern the extent to which social organizations such as the media are within or beyond the state, it is possible to identify certain state structures and practices that operate to regulate the media. In Canada, a series of ten definable policy



instruments and roles can be said to have influenced the operations of the media. As a *proprietor*, the state owns a series of important corporations and agencies including the CBC and the NFB, to which it devolves certain decision-making powers. As a *custodian*, the state owns museums and archives. The custodian role has important, if largely indirect, effects on the media of communication. The state is a *regulator* through its legislative authority to set standards and define property rights as well as through the work of its regulatory agencies, notably the Canadian Radio-television Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). Certain state laws and regulations, such as the Criminal Code, the Security of Information Act, and the Emergencies Act, enable the state to act as *censor*. The state also uses a range of softer policy instruments, acting as *patron* through its control of the purse, offering grants and prizes, and acting as a *catalyst* in stimulating media through tax incentives, subsidies, and other incentives. Finally, state institutions and practices themselves are objects of interest and routinely interact with the media. The state is a central *actor*, a supplier of important news material. It is authoritative and, in a political economy of declining story resources and inadequate investigative news professionals, state institutions and personnel generate dramatic and cheap copy on a routine basis and with the appearance of objectivity. In the Canadian media, state elites routinely establish the agenda. On the basis of elite theory, the state can also be regarded as *ideologue* and even *conspirator*, and its personnel and their staffs can be seen to spin and privilege certain interpretations of fact as news *masseurs*.

In the language of neoliberalism, the Social Investment State (Giddens 1998) brings substantial pressure on the state to reduce its role as proprietor, custodian, patron, and regulator. Budgets for the CBC and the NFB have been substantially reduced, whereas staffs, programs, and bureaus have been cut (Nesbitt-Larking 2007, 129). A series of public-private initiatives in patronage, such as Telefilm Canada, have developed, and the federal and provincial states and their agencies have been under great pressure to deregulate. As Mosco (1996, 201) points out, however, a diminution in state regulation does not mean a reduction in regulation of the media as such. Instead, it implies a corresponding increase in market regulation of the media, and this has direct consequences for news and informational content as well as other decisions of channel, carriage, and content. Moreover, deregulation of the private sector has been accompanied by incremental losses of independence among the various agencies, boards, and commissions established, ostensibly at arm's length, from the government. The CBC, Telefilm Canada, the NFB, and the CRTC have increasingly been micromanaged and placed under scrutiny and pressure from governments.

An increasingly important element of in-state regulation of the media in Canada is the judicial system (Martin 2003). This is particularly critical in the post-September 11 condition of information control, surveillance, and secrecy. Freedom of the press, enshrined in section 2 (b) of the Charter, has been entrenched as a right in Canada since 1982. However, media freedom has never been an absolute



right. The various counterbalances that have been established throughout the decades reflect a complex of factors that are grounded in the need to maintain order and the desire to promote equality. The right of the public to know, so proudly entrenched in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, has traditionally taken a back seat to the self-assigned duty of elites to maintain peace, order, and good government, and to administer sober and discreet justice. Canada's Security of Information Act (2001) and its predecessor, the Official Secrets Act (1939), have been potential bludgeons on the statute books to be used at the discretion of the state to prevent the dissemination of a broad range of matters that they deem to be of importance to national security (Siegel 1996, 63–69). Elements of the law have been invoked to silence professional journalists in Canada. In November 2004, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police used section 4 of the Security of Information Act to raid the home of *Ottawa Citizen* foreign affairs correspondent Juliet O'Neil, confiscating her computers, papers, and files. Following a series of appeals, Ontario Superior Court Judge Ratushny struck down section 4 of the Security of Information Act, ruling that it was "unconstitutionally vague" and that it unreasonably limited freedom of expression. Despite this partial redress in favor of media freedom, the existence of laws and regulations of such generality condition journalists to exercise caution and self-censorship. To the extent that the state can sustain a climate of risk, fear, and ambiguity, the routine tasks of maintaining order and legitimating dominant discourses are undertaken by those who are objects of state surveillance, rather than by the institutions and personnel of the state itself. The tentacles of the state can be said to take control of media professionals themselves, who then become (indirectly) a part of the apparatus of government (Rose 1999). To the extent that the climate of risk and fear escalates into an apprehended threat to the state itself, so the agency of media professionals is drawn closer into the service of censorship and agitational propaganda (Compton 2004; Peers 1973, 323).

The media are essential to democracy just as are political parties, open and free elections, and the rule of law. A free press is vital in a democracy for a very basic reason. It keeps the state's power in check and expose abuses of authority. In eighteenth-century Britain, where power resided with the estates of the clergy, the nobility, and elected commons, Edmund Burke famously observed that "yonder there sat a Fourth Estate more powerful far than they all" (attributed to Burke in Carlyle [1907], 228). Robert Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao (1998, 1) suggest that "journalism is arguably the most important form of public knowledge in contemporary society. The mass media...have become the leading institution of the public sphere." The task of the media is nothing less than providing the requisite information to citizens so that they can fulfill the demands of democracy and understand the world around them. According to Pippa Norris (2000, 12), the functions of the media are to create a civic forum to encourage public debate, to act as watchdogs against abuses of state power, and to mobilize the public to learn about politics and become active in the political process.



## CULTURE, IDEOLOGY, AND DISCOURSE: THE CULTIVATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND VALUE IN CANADA

---

The media are key actors in the production and reproduction of ideas and ideals in a polity. Media organizations, their key personnel, and the texts they generate are profoundly important agencies in the promotion of knowledge, insight, and viewpoint. For this reason, a great deal of media research in Canada and beyond explores the politics of gatekeeping, agenda setting, framing, and priming (Nesbitt-Larking 2007, 331–337). Gatekeeping describes the propensity of news professionals to tame the information tide by reducing the enormous floods of news stories to manageable trickles of media content, thereby determining what gets into the news. Agenda setting refers to correlations between the issues reported in the media and those that media consumers find most important (McCombs and Shaw 1972). By focusing on certain issues (and therefore ignoring others) the media shape what citizens believe to be significant. The impact of agenda setting is influenced by a number of different factors, such as how abstract or concrete a story is, whether it is dramatic, if readers had prior knowledge of it, and how long the story lasts. Framing describes the way media professionals construct a news story through context, background, and orientation, thereby privileging certain readings and constructions. Priming refers to standards that people use to evaluate leaders, governments, parties, or issues (Iyengar and Kinder 1987) and is a consequence of agenda setting. Scholars such as Linda Trimble (2005), who write about women in politics, remind us that the media prime the public through the use of sexist stereotypes to frame female politicians in a manner that identifies successful political role models with males.

Media organizations and personnel operate in a field of societal ideas in which they are both senders and receivers, and in which it is often impossible to distinguish among the multiplicity of voices. Contemporary social theory uses the concept of discourse to express the range of more or less coherent systems of belief and value that are available to social actors. To engage in discourse is to contribute to the production and reproduction of texts. Texts can be spoken or written, and they can assume almost any symbolic form. What these symbolic forms share is the capacity—more or less opaque—to render or represent the world. Less obvious, but of equal importance, is the capacity of discourses to shape, condition, and change the world. Discourses use a range of narrative forms in which to encode symbols and render them expressive. Discourses are operational across a range of sociopsychological settings—from media texts through dialogue and deliberation, and the reproduction of symbols to the internal argumentation of the process of thinking (Billig 1991, 14). In their very invocation and use, discourses exert material effects on the worlds in which they are at play. As primary definers of political reality, the media clearly have a critical role to play in the reproduction of organizations, institutions, ideals, policies, and practices.



Discourses are the symbolic outcomes of arguments and as such are ideologically constituted entities. Discourses privilege certain readings of the world and prefer certain interpretations. To infuse a discourse with particular patterns of ideas that purport to explain and justify the world—ostensibly in the interests of all, but actually to the advantage of specific communities—is to engage in ideological work. Ideologies themselves are the consequence of the deliberate selection and shaping of ideas and ideals found in a broadly available political culture. Agents promoting an ideological orientation adopt one or more generic elements in the diffuse culture and then represent them in a more or less coherent view of the world. Discourses are the ideal site in which to unearth the work of ideology in shaping and privileging aspects of the broader culture through the subjective and intersubjective work of reception.

Although there is an impressive tradition of research on the ideological character of Canadian media content (Grenier 1991; Winter 2002), much of it is articulated around an instrumentalist view of ideology as the imposition of “false consciousness” and of mass audiences as passive recipients. Recent Canadian scholarship is now adopting a more balanced and better informed view of media audiences (Clarke 2005; Dyer-Witheford 2005), one that takes into account the capacity of media audiences to discriminate, to decode, to seek out counterdiscourses, and to deconstruct. The mainstream media may indeed prefer and privilege certain discourses, and in the context of global corporate convergence deliver conservative, stereotyped, and sensationalist material. Graham Knight (1991) explains how, through its skills in manipulating television conventions to look “real,” tabloid television has been able to win and maintain large audiences. Using a variety of techniques and tapping into a range of broadly accepted cultural conventions, tabloid television has been able to win our trust and in so doing reproduce cynical and righteous conservative discourses that reproduce fear and contempt through constant portrayals of greed and corruption on the part of the elites, and violent, unpredictable rage on the part of social deviants. The news anchors and hosts of tabloid television set themselves up as the righteous voice of reason and the bearers of commonsense decency. Tabloid television does not have to explain itself or its promotion of certain ideological values, because as a genre its codes and conventions actually index whatever it is they purport to be displaying.

Tabloid television is clever and innovative, but it struggles to stay ahead of the discursive sophistication of its audiences. In the contemporary setting of multiple sources of political information and opinion, and of increasingly critical and discriminating audiences, cheap, sensationalized, clichéd, and ideologically slanted media texts may satisfy some of the people, some of the time. Not, however, younger and better educated Canadians, who have either turned off or are tuning into the reinvention of political journalism that is taking place on late-night comedy-news shows, or engaging themselves in cyberactivism.

Public journalism, also known as *civic journalism*, is a movement designed to put the media back in the center of the public debate. Public journalism asks journalists to address citizens as participants, not spectators; seeks to help the public to go beyond mere learning and act on its problems; and attempts to improve the climate of public discussion (Rosen 1999, 262). This is achieved through town hall meetings



and creating opportunities for meaningful deliberation and debate. Public journalism initiatives are a further expression of informed citizens with the will to act as their own gatekeepers and agenda setters free from both the impoverishing impact of the corporate media and regulation from the state and media professionals. In conclusion, although it is true to say that Canadian states appear to be decreasingly capable of regulating media corporations, neither states nor corporations can keep up with the increasingly daunting challenge of regulating audiences.

## CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF THE MASS MEDIA?

---

The emerging research on new ICTs and Canadian politics tends to support Small's (2007) thesis that the use of cyberspace adds little that is new to existing modes of communication and that the Internet is basically used "to amplify traditional methods of campaigning." In McLuhan's terms, our initial use of any new medium is conditioned by expectations that have been generated through the use of the old medium. Just as TV was initially used in a "radiolike" manner, so our use of the Internet by established political actors is struggling to move beyond TV mode. In its Canadian context, the Internet is embedded in the sociocultural, economic, and political realities already outlined in this chapter. The familiar dialectical tensions and the forces and relations that have shaped the national experience will therefore inform the character of whatever new ICTs emerge. At the same time, ICTs open up a plethora of new possibilities.

Much has been written on the decline of traditional media and the impact of the Internet on both the business side as well as the consumption side of mass media. Although it is true that network news viewing is losing share to the Internet (Davis 1999; Tremayne 2007), the implications of the Internet on news reporting, dissemination, and production are not clear. Some see the Internet as a great democratizing influence, creating multiple channels and allowing anyone with a computer to be a creator and consumer of news. Others see the Internet as further evidence that serious journalism is on the decline.

On the news-reporting side, it is clear that blogs have changed the nature of news reporting. Although the vast majority of blogs are about personal expression, several prominent ones, such as those of Americans Matt Drudge and Ariana Huffington, and Canadians Warren Kinsella, Andrew Coyne, and Garth Turner, have a devoted and influential audience on political matters. The blurring of the boundary lines between casual opinion and news professionalism marks a late-modern development in information flow that some regard with concern and others find liberating. Whether they are a new outlet for the corporate media, a soapbox for the disaffected and marginalized, or a voice for average citizens, blogs offer easy access to potentially large audiences.



Rapid dissemination is both the greatest strength and the profoundest weakness of blogs. A strong ideologically driven network of independent bloggers is most effective in responding to a story in the mainstream media. This allows for easy and effective mobilization of issue publics but means that those quality checks and constraints that are imposed on the professional media are absent. The range of diversity of quality among blogs makes them more akin to the penny press of the nineteenth century than to what remains of traditional journalism today. In this regard, the future of the media may in some ways approximate its past, with the reemergence of an uncontrolled mélange of fact, opinion, gossip, and vitriol.

The Internet has already had a dramatic effect on the way citizens consume the news. According to Ahlers (2006, 34), "the concept of single media use is fading." One study found that there is very little difference in the minds of consumers between online news and its hard-copy version and that consumers do not see these as competition to one another but rather as complementary. Contemporary modes of media consumption are both multichannel and multimedia. Younger users in particular report listening to the radio while online (47%), while 33% watch TV while online and 44% talk on the phone while on the Internet (Ahlers 2006, 34). The new realities of ICTs in the Canadian mediascape have done little to shift the fundamentals of media and politics in Canada that we have outlined. However, certain trends are emerging that suggest important developments in the future. The dialectics of those Canadian dualities that constructed Canada as an outpost of empire long ago resulted in a distinctive balance between technology and nature and a polity of cautious expansionism, giving rise to a constant tension between danger and opportunity. In the era of globalization, this Canadian experience has found increasing resonance through the emerging identity struggles of late-modern political movements worldwide. To the extent that ICTs are changing the Canadian political landscape, it is through the agency of new audiences. Audiences are much more active in the creation of political information than they ever have been. The multimedia environment, blogs, and other innovations in ICTs, such as ubiquitous cameras and instant messaging, are reshaping political consciousness and political cultures. In so doing, they are setting limits to the possibilities of any ideological forces that might emerge. Corporate conglomerates remain powerful and continue to move toward oligopoly through mergers and convergences. Canadian states retain their legitimacy and their coercive force. However, the role of the media in Canadian politics depends in the end upon what Edwin Black (1982, 149) said long before the rise of the new ICTs: "In much of the heated debate about the power of the mass media, one critical factor is neglected: the audience. Is anybody paying attention?"

## REFERENCES

- Ahlers, Douglas. 2006. News consumption and the new electronic media. *International Journal of Press/Politics* 11(1): 29–52.



- Babe, Robert. 2000a. *Canadian Communication Thought: Ten Foundational Writers*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- . 2000b. Foundations of Canadian communication thought. *Canadian Journal of Communication* 25(1): 19–37.
- Beck, Ulrich. 1999. *The Reinvention of Politics: Rethinking Modernity in the Global Social Order*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bennett, W. Lance. 2005. *News: The Politics of Illusion*, 6th ed. New York: Pearson Longman.
- Billig, Michael. 1991. *Ideology and Opinions: Studies in Rhetorical Psychology*. London: Sage Publications.
- Black, Edwin. 1982. *Politics and the News: The Political Functions of the Mass Media*. Toronto: Butterworths.
- Canada. 1981. *Report of the Royal Commission on Newspapers*. Royal Commission on Newspapers (The Kent Commission). Ottawa: Supply and Services Canada.
- . 2003. *Our Cultural Sovereignty: The Second Century of Canadian Broadcasting*. Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage. Ottawa: Communications Canada—Publishing.
- Canada, Industry Canada. 2008. Convergence policy statement. March 22. <http://www.ic.gc.ca/epic/site/smt-gst.nsf/en/sf05265e.html>.
- Carlyle, Thomas. [1841] 1907. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Chomsky, Noam, and Edward Herman. 1988. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon.
- Clarke, Debra. 2005. Bourdieu's "show and hide" paradox reconsidered: Audience experiences of convergence in the Canadian mediascape. In *Converging Media, Diverging Politics: A Political Economy of News Media in the United States and Canada*, ed. David Skinner, James R. Compton, and Michael Gasher, 165–186. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.
- Compton, James. 2004. *The Integrated News Spectacle: A Political Economy of Cultural Performance*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Curran, James. 2005. Mediations on democracy. In *Mass Media and Society*, 4th ed., ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, 122–153. London: Oxford University Press.
- Davis, Richard. 1999. *The Web of Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dyer-Witheford, Nick. 2005. Canadian cyberactivism in the cycle of counter globalization struggles. In *Converging Media, Diverging Politics: A Political Economy of News Media in the United States and Canada*, ed. David Skinner, James R. Compton, and Michael Gasher, 267–290. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1998. *The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Grenier, Marc, ed. 1991. *Critical Studies of Canadian Mass Media*. Toronto: Butterworths.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Enquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Hackett, Robert. 1986. For a socialist perspective on the news media. *Studies in Political Economy* 19: 141–156.
- Hackett, Robert, and Yuezhi Zhao. 1998. *Sustaining Democracy: Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity*. Toronto: Garamond Press.
- Innis, Harold. 1971. *The Bias of Communication*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Iyengar, Shanto, and Donald Kinder. 1987. *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press.
- Knight, Graham. 1991. The reality effects of tabloid television news. In *Communication For and Against Democracy*, ed. Marc Raboy and Peter Bruck, 111–129. Toronto: Butterworths.



- Knowles, Elizabeth, ed. 1998. *The Oxford Dictionary of Twentieth Century Quotations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Macpherson, C. B. 1975. *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Magder, Ted. 1989. Taking culture seriously: A political economy of communications. In *The New Canadian Political Economy*, ed. Wallace Clement and Glen Williams, 278–296. Kingston: McGill Queens University Press.
- Martin, Robert. 2003. *Media Law*, 2nd ed. Toronto: Irwin Law.
- McChesney, Robert, and Robert Hackett. 2005. Beyond wiggle room: American corporate media's democratic deficit, its global implications, and prospects for reform. In *Democratizing Global Media: One World, Many Struggles*, ed. Robert Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, 225–267. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.
- McCombs, Maxwell, and Donald Shaw. 1972. Agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36(2): 176–187.
- McLuhan, Marshall. 1966. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- . 1967. *The Medium Is the Massage*. London: Penguin.
- Mosco, Vincent. 1996. *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal*. London: Sage.
- Nesbitt-Larking, Paul. 2007. *Politics, Society and the Media*, 2nd ed. Peterborough: Broadview.
- Norris, Pippa. 2000. *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Peers, Frank. 1973. *The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting, 1920–1951*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Rose, Nikolas S. 1999. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosen, Jay. 1999. *What Are Journalists For?* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- Shade, Leslie Regan. 2005. Aspergate: Concentration, convergence, and censorship in Canadian media. In *Converging Media, Diverging Politics: A Political Economy of News Media in the United States and Canada*, ed. David Skinner, James R. Compton, and Michael Gasher, 101–116. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.
- Siegel, Arthur. 1996. *Politics and the Media in Canada*, 2nd ed. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.
- Skinner, David, and Mike Gasher. 2005. So much by so few: Media policy and ownership in Canada. In *Converging Media, Diverging Politics: A Political Economy of News Media in the United States and Canada*, ed. David Skinner, James R. Compton, and Michael Gasher, 51–76. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.
- Small, Tamara. 2007. Canadian cyberparties: Reflections on Internet-based campaigning and party systems. *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 40(3): 639–657.
- Smythe, Dallas. 1977. Communications: Blindspot of western Marxism. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1(3): 1–27.
- . 1978. Rejoinder to Graham Murdock. *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 2(2): 120–126.
- . 1981. On the audience commodity and its work. In *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*, ed. Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, 230–256. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Taras, David. 1999. *Power and Betrayal in the Canadian Media*. Peterborough: Broadview.
- Tremayne, Mark, ed. 2007. *Blogging, Citizenship, and the Future of Media*. London: Routledge.



- Trimble, Linda. 2005. "Who framed Belinda Stronach? National newspaper coverage of the Conservative Party of Canada's 2004 leadership race." Presented at the 2005 Canadian Political Science Association Conference, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, June 2-4.
- Winter, James. 2002. *Media Think*. Montreal: Black Rose Books.