

Self-contained grand theorists do not require one another for completion since they already aspire to be complete. It can be interesting to discover what unsuspected incompletenesses emerge in their comparison, however. If they seem after all to be compatible or complementary, we can believe either that some universal theories share similar characteristics, or that reality truly exhibits the same face to each lens even from different foci. Such comparisons are not my purpose. Nor is it my intention to join the ranks of Marxian critics, or even to make a choice among the three theorists under discussion. The question I wish to address is how adequate a framework Innis's theory provides for Western history. My comments are offered in that spirit.²

Innis's intuitive appeal is very great to anyone for whom communication is a central intellectual preoccupation. He offers an apparently powerful media theory to criticize the world we live in. His notion that media forms shape political institutions and cultural habits of mind is not quite a notion of original sin, but something nearly as intractable. The influence of those forms is so pervasive, it is Innis's object to show, that the intermediate solutions in terms of which most political discourse is conducted will always fail because they do not touch the means by which we structure our world and our associations with others in it. This rejection of the terms of contemporary culture is a radical posture. Lacking remedies, however, and with a view that the most moral communication is a state from which we have historically fallen and to which there is no returning, Innis's outlook is pessimistic and deeply conservative.

As the means of production are critical for Marx, so the means of communication are critical for Innis. What governs the potency of voice, stone, clay, parchment, papyrus, and paper are their relative attributes of durability and portability. These attributes select victors among competing historical powers by conferring relative advantages of range and longevity in the exercise of authority. But Innis offers no notion of Communicating Man equivalent to Economic Man to explain exactly how communication structures mind and society, since durability and portability account (if they do) only for media and not at all for communication. Nor does Innis ever give us a definition of medium which makes it possible to construct a notion of what is *not* a consequence of its action in any of its variety of incarnations. With so little of the essential theoretical scaffolding made explicit, communicative consequences are assumed but never investigated.

Does it matter? It does indeed. While Innis is praised for a political economy of communication that reaches beyond newspapers and broadcasting to pre-industrial media, and especially to speech, it

remains unclear why some social artifacts are media in his scheme and others are not. Why aren't clothing, art, architecture, etiquette, cuisine, transportation, and all forms of economic activity modes of communication? Or, if stone and clay are media, where is the analysis of the civic building or the temple as significant communicative expression, or of the Greek amphitheater, or even the modern skyscraper? Social forms designated as media exert their influence on historical experience over other candidate media by no identifiable principle. Nor does Innis demonstrate why the same media, available to different groups, fail to confer the same power or veneration on them all, or what it really means, in the multi-media history of the world, to label a medium as "dominant."

According to Innis, one of the important things that distinguishes one medium from another is how difficult it is to move each one across space. Since media artifacts do not move themselves, systems of communication are functionally indivisible from systems of transportation. But Innis neglects this dimension of the story entirely. It would be difficult to argue that mere portability automatically gives rise to suitable modes of transport, or that media modes can be historically more potent than the efficiency of the systems of transportation on which they depend.

A close reading of some of Innis's work, moreover, suggests a technological plasticity at odds with his theory. Media which are space-binding on some historical occasions turn out to be time-binding on others. If the theory supposes that political institutions and cultural dispositions are transformed through modal characteristics of media, the list of features explaining changes in politics and culture cannot legitimately include differences in political and cultural organization from society to society. Without acknowledging that he does so, Innis invokes such differences himself. But because his theory requires him to ignore them as much as possible, he is unable to notice a number of lines of inquiry they suggest.

In this much too brief critique of Innis's theory, I will allow myself a single hasty example to illustrate the kind of significant cultural discrimination at which I think Innis is aiming, but which escapes the net of modal analysis. For Innis, a man of the twentieth century, print and paper present a single spatially biased face. But a spate of detailed and excellent recent scholarship on the history of literacy in the West has demonstrated that literate modes (which exemplify other organized uses of other communications media as well) offer opportunities for complex expressions of social, political, and economic stratification. In eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century France, and not alone there, writing and reading were often culturally dissociated. Reading was the mode of receptivity to the word of

God, and to salvation. Its claims were universal, for if even the poor could at least read, God would take care of the rest. Skill in reading accompanied by an absence of skill in writing was a form of non-scholastic, religiously grounded, usually familial acculturation especially prevalent among women. Skill in writing, accompanied often by poor reading skill, belonged to the civil domain of males. It was gradually transformed from a rare and learned art to a convenience to a status symbol. Reading belonged to religion, morality, and women; writing was a male apprenticeship of utility.³ Here is a difference in modal practice and cultural consequence to which only an analysis that admits cultural shapes is sensitive, and which it is the thrust of Innis's framework to defeat.

Equally puzzling is the fact that Innis never takes half his theory, the half he likes best, seriously enough. Closely examined, his notion of time-binding turns out to be nothing more than a unique case of limited transmission. He gives no attention to retrieval and storage systems as media attributes of some variety and importance, and of something more, real effect. Though memory depends on selection and significance and not merely on durability, Innis treats neither of these. Nor does he discuss traditional memory objects as media.

This brings us to some conceptual difficulties of the distinction between space- and time-binding, a distinction which provides Innis with the engine he needs to move history and make its consequences intelligible. Innis never explains why a medium may be classified either as space- or time-binding, but not both at once. A little reflection will tell us that powerful media have always "bound" both space and time. Elizabeth Eisenstein makes this clear in her discussion of the impact of printing. It is arguable that with its instantaneous and expansive reach and its powerful memory, computing will have historical consequences of the same magnitude.

McLuhan was perhaps more consistent than his colleague mentor in making a medium of everything, though that strategy, as McLuhan developed it, sacrificed both force and historical precision. Innis's implicit definition of media appeals to the characteristics and settings of messages, and to knowledge of their authors, a discouraging state of affairs for a theory which claims to be medium-based. Although oral tradition is not limited in Innis's discussion to particular kinds of content, he treats clay, stone, parchment, and papyrus as media only when they carry the bureaucratic inscriptions of religious or secular elites. Paper, like speech, is allowed more popular and more culturally diverse content. All this seems fairly arbitrary. And what are we to make of the fact that what Innis offers as a radical revision of history disturbs none of our previous periodizations, nor even any of the labels by which we designate (and therefore begin to explain)

epochs and peoples. It is as though the arena of history were otherwise uncontested, and historians have simply misnamed its underlying "causes." Even assuming this to be the case (I suspect few historians do), there would be none but aesthetic reasons to prefer Innis's account except that it appeals to us, since he does not show us what we can do with his theory that has not already been done by scholars working without media explanations.

If Innis offers us neither theoretical rigor nor close historical detail, what keeps the flame alive? I think it is his ability to see communications technology as something more than transparent extra-historical transmitting and recording devices, and his striking early intuition that modes of communication have powerful effects on social organization, even though he does not offer a clear historical account of this process. He speaks for something in all of us in his disillusionment with the attenuation and dilution of personal experience by communication made remote for social control. He also assumes, using Marx's vocabulary for Innis's problematic, that only oral communication is unalienated communication. But the consequences of making meaning alienated or exteriorized — what in other circles is called the problem of interpretation — which Innis does not trust in some media he does not notice in others, especially speech.

The idea that modes of communication propagate and reflect the interests of specific classes and groups is a powerful theme of contemporary scholarship. Innis was one of the first to make the case that elites use the tools of communication to pursue power, and equally that media may become vehicles to subvert entrenched elites.

Perhaps *neither* Innis, McLuhan, nor Marx, but the same problem as always: resisting the temptation to substitute grand theory for patient analysis of the complexity of human imagination and circumstances that the residue of social forms in historical records reveals.

1. For reasons of parsimony, I am collapsing McLuhan into Innis for this discussion. I agree with Jim Carey that as a "student" of Innis, McLuhan attempted (with less success) to do for psychological perception what Innis attempted to do for institutional organization.

2. Elsewhere I have developed some of these arguments in greater detail. See Marvin, "Space, Time, and Captive Communications History," in Mary Mander, ed., *Communications in Transition: Issues and Debates in Current Research* (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 20-38.

3. Francois Furet and Jacques Ozouf, *Reading and Writing, Literacy in France from Calvin to Jules Ferry* (Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1977; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

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