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Marshall McLuhan and Harold A. Innis: Communication Theory (for a Multicultural World) 'à la canadienne' ?
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Marshall McLuhan and Harold A. Innis: Communication Theory (for a Multicultural World) 'à la canadienne'?

“Marshall McLuhan and Harold A. Innis: Communication Theory (for a Multicultural World) 'à la canadienne'” – that was the title of an interdisciplinary workshop held by the Institute for Canadian Studies (University of Augsburg) on June 14 and 15, 2012. One of the reasons for choosing this topic for an international workshop was the 100th birthday of the Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan that took place in 2011. Together with Harold Innis he is considered the founder of the Toronto School of Communication which was one of the first to examine the impact of medial and technological development on societal changes, as PHILIPP GASSERT (Augsburg), Chair for Transatlantic Cultural History, outlined in his opening remarks. Recent developments in the Western and in the Arab World being closely linked with the use of social media made the issue even more prevailing. Discussions during the workshop thus often came back to the issue of democracy and the influences new media evoke on its performance – in a positive as well as in a negative manner. Another focus was put onto the special Canadian context in which McLuhan and Innis had developed their theoretical approaches. The way they were influenced by what one might call Canadian identity and the way in which they themselves influenced the perception of Canadian society and politics through communication means played a crucial role in the presentations given during the workshop.

In his keynote address “Communicative Abundance and Democracy: New Probes inspired by the Writings of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan” JOHN KEANE

(Sydney) painted a rather positive picture of the role of new media in democratization processes as they have recently taken place in several Arab countries. Other than the “old media”, Keane outlined, the internet reunified text, sound, and image; therefore, the differentiation that McLuhan once had made between hot and cool media – cool media require greater effort by the consumer to understand the content whereas hot media only require little involvement – was obsolete. Furthermore, Keane characterized the internet as a “distributed network”, contrary to the former centralized and decentralized structures of communication. Caused by the “communicative abundance”, Keane pointed out that we find ourselves today in a new revolutionary age. He demonstrated this on four trends: First, the internet has led to a *democratization of information*. It enables citizens to inform themselves by having cost-free or very cheap access to information collected in huge databases. Second, the internet constantly *blurs the difference between the private and the public sphere*. This, of course, also leads us to the normative question of what should be private and what should be public. Strongly related to that trend is the third one, which he subsumes under the label “*new mug raking*”. Through the invention of the internet a new level of revelation and exposure of public persons, especially politicians that have to resign due to these revelations has been reached. As a fourth trend, Keane pointed out the *phenomenon of unelected representatives*. Their credibility and their persuasive power often make them a symbol for a whole group of people.

Although Keane admitted that there were also dark

sides of the spread of media usage and technological development he stressed the positive impact they have on democratic development and considered himself to be an optimist concerning the role of the internet in democratization processes. By enabling citizens to constantly monitor government officials the unscrutinized exercise of power became even more illegitimate and therefore leads to democratization processes, he argued.

The first section on Friday morning was chaired by PETER A. KRAUS (Augsburg) who has recently been appointed Chair of Political Science at the University of Augsburg. Two papers dealing with the specific Canadian context in which the Toronto School of Communication has emerged were presented in this section.

KLAUS BENESCH (Munich), who is Professor of North American Literary History, presented a paper named "US-Canadian Myth Criticism: A Comparative Look at Northrop Frye, Marshall McLuhan and Leo Marx". In his lecture, Benesch stressed the Canadian lack of a single and universal identity as classified by Northrop Frye. Some even considered Canada to be a "country without mythology" (Davies). This lack of mythology has been interpreted by critics like Frye and McLuhan as a universal mythology in itself. In this context, McLuhan primarily focused on the construction of such a myth through media technology. This interest was shared by Leo Marx, a US-American cultural critic. Both scholars' work is characterized by a "technological determinism" in the sense that they consider technological development to be a process independent from human intervention. From this technological determinism derives McLuhans probably most cited phrase "The medium is the message" – which has often been criticized.

Among those critics is also MICHÈLE MARTIN (Ottawa) Professor for Communication, Sociologist and second presenter on the first section of the workshop. The title of her paper was "The Canadian School of Communication: Innis', McLuhan's, Grant's and Smythe's contribution to the field of communication and mass media in Canada and elsewhere". Like Benesch, she also focuses on the issue of technological determinism which has been stressed by McLuhan and Innis, but also by the less popular communication theorists George Grant and Dallas W. Smythe who brought the class issue into the debate. Grant considers technology and therefore technological development as a means of power. Societal structures in a capitalist society, he argues, are reflected in technological developments. In a similar direction argues Smythe who is most known for his writings on the "audi-

ence blindspot" a phenomenon which has come into the focus of the public interest again with the spreading of social media. As "audience blindspot", Smythe describes the fact that the audience's labor power is being exploited through advertising as the audience contributes both to the production of the advertisers' and to the producers' profit – without being aware of it. His argumentation is thus a clearly Marxist one, as is also Grant's. McLuhan as well stressed the meaning of classes for technological development and the perception of media. Although Martin fundamentally disagreed with his statement that the message was the medium she acknowledged McLuhan's crucial role in founding a theory dealing with communication in general and media in general. According to her, McLuhan could also provide useful insights particularly concerning the way in which social media change our societies today. This was also one of the points the following discussion focused on: The participants asked about the exercise of power through social media or nearly-monopolists such as Google. Some stressed that other than the old media, the internet and especially the web 2.0 involved the user from the beginning. Instead of being a one-way-street of communication, structures become more decentralized; therefore, the exercise of power through new media might be harder to identify and thus harder to resist against than within the old media.

After a short pause the Workshop continued with the second panel chaired by RAINER-OLAF SCHULTZE (Augsburg), predecessor of Kraus as chair for political sciences and still director of the Institute for Canadian Studies. Like Michèle Martin, HENRIK G. BASTIANSEN (Oslo) asked about the impact the Toronto School of Communication could have on today's communication theory. However, he focused stronger on methodological tools the historical sciences could employ in order to use Innis' and McLuhan's approach to examine communicative and technological developments in recent decades. His research mainly concentrated on the Norwegian context for which he had found out that the rise of television in the 1960s and 1970s had led to the fall of the party press.

The final presentation by RALF LINDNER (Berlin) in a way summarized the issues which had been subject of discussions and presentations during the day. He asked about the impact technological advancement could have on the development of both societies and democracies. Other than Keane in his keynote address Lindner pointed at the ambiguous effects the internet potentially could evoke. The World Wide Web, he argued, offered a wide

range of communication possibilities, which could not only be used as means of liberation and the pursuit of freedom of expression but also as a technology of control. Lindner admitted that the internet had widened the processes of agenda-setting to new groups of society but he reminded that the social conditions in which technologies are applied had to be taken into consideration. Pointing at the often normatively loaded debate, he asked for a stronger empirical and analytical view on the subject which takes into account both positive and negative impacts technological innovation can have on societal and democratic development.

The following discussion mainly concentrated on developments in Europe and especially in Germany. The scholars tried to interpret the role the newly evolving party “The Pirates” has for the change of the German party system. Great interest has also been shown concerning the interdependencies between the development of party systems including the change of voting stabilities in general and the formation of the internet.

The interdisciplinary workshop has shown that there are many ways in which communication theory and the development of new media such as the internet and the web 2.0 influence today’s societies and democratization processes. Even though today hardly anybody is willing to share Innis’ and McLuhan’s technological determinism, the Toronto School of Communication can still provide a worthwhile background for analyzing those interdependencies. Several disciplines – history, social and political sciences as well as literature – contributed

fruitfully to the insights given by the workshop. However, many open questions remain in that field which is currently going through great changes: communication means are advancing faster and faster, revolutions take place in the Arab world, newly democratized systems like Egypt will have to prove their stability, and the changes of party systems in Europe are by no means coming to an end. Therefore, much space for further research remains in that interesting and dynamic field to which the Toronto School of Communication certainly can give worthwhile impulses.

Conference Overview:

Keynote Address John Keane (Sydney): *Communicative Abundance and Democracy: New Probes inspired by the Writings of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan*

Klaus Benesch (Munich): *US-Canadian Myth-Criticism: A Comparative Look at Northrop Frye, Marshall McLuhan and Leo Marx*

Michèle Martin (Ottawa): *The Canadian School of Communication: Innis’, McLuhan’s, Grant’s and Smythe’s contribution to the field of communication and mass media in Canada and elsewhere*

Henrik G. Bastiansen (Volda, Norway): *From Harold Innis to Marshall McLuhan and Beyond: The Toronto School of Communication and the Rise of Research in Media History*

Ralf Lindner (Karlsruhe / Berlin): *The transformative potential of new media: between hype and reality*

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