

Information X Society =
Technology

COMN 2312/2319

Harold Innis Marshall McLuhan

Resources for today:

[Old Messengers, New Media: The Legacy of Innis and McLuhan](#)

Website at Library and Archives Canada

And

[Toronto School of Communication](#) by Toronto School of
Communication by Twyla Gibson, Ph.D.

Senior McLuhan Fellow

Harold Innis

Marshall McLuhan

Video Resources for today:
McLuhan's Wake

Harold Innis

Marshall McLuhan

Influenced:

- Canadian Studies
- Communications and Media Studies
- Toronto School of Communication:

University of Toronto was for this brief period the intellectual centre of the world

~ Oswyn Murray, fellow of Balliol College at Oxford University as quoted by Twyla Gibson



Harold Innis

Influenced and Influenced by

Eric Havelock: Orality and Culture

**Marshall McLuhan: Effects &
Extensions of Media**

Walter Ong: Sound and Culture

**John Eisenberg: Technology and
Human Thought**



Harold Innis

“Many scholars consider Innis one of Canada's most original thinkers”
Wikipedia

University of Toronto, Professor of Political Economy:

Media + Culture

Canadian Culture : “Innis laid the basis for scholarship that looked at the the social sciences from a distinctly Canadian Point of View”
Wikipedia



Harold Innis

Things affecting his theorizing

Witnessed the rise of several technologies (especially of communication) alongside experiencing the devastation of World War I as soldier; WW II as citizen and Cold War/Atomic era

Communications” was an undefined field during his era



Harold Innis

Concepts:

Staple Theory

Time- and Space-Bias

Monopolies of Knowledge

Revolutions in Communications
Technology

The Bias of Writing



Harold Innis

Staple Theory

He depicted the relationship between regions of Canada as one of "heartland" to "hinterland." According to Innis, a specific kind of economic and political relationship grew from the dominance of the Toronto-Montreal urban corridor over the eastern, northern and western peripheries. *From Old Messengers: New Media Website*



Harold Innis

Staple Theory

The periphery, or hinterland, was dominated by the core, or heartland. Because the heartland was dependent upon the search for and accumulation of staples (which were located in the hinterland) to perpetuate the economy, it sought to gain economic and political power by exploiting the hinterland.

From *Old Messenger: New Media*



Harold Innis

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From *Old Messenger: New Media*



Harold Innis

Staple Theory

While Canada was aggressively farming wheat, cutting logs, fishing and trapping for fur, it was not producing anything from these raw materials and was therefore forced to import finished products.

From Old Messenger: New Media



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Harold Innis

Time and Space Bias

Innis disliked the notion that time was progress; he saw history as operating in a cyclical pattern.

Because we are "too much a part" of our own civilization and the media that dominate our lives, according to Innis, the influential characteristics of those media are hidden from us.

From *Old Messenger: New Media*



Harold Innis

Time and Space Bias

Time-biased media seek to transcend time. They are heavy and durable, such as clay and stone. They have a long lifespan but they do not encourage the extension of empires. Innis associated these media with the customary, the sacred, and the moral. Time-biased media facilitate the development of social and industrial hierarchies. They also favour the growth of religion and the hegemony that religion imposes on secondary institutions, such as education. For Innis, speech is also a time-biased medium. Speech, in the form of oral culture, can be

From *Old Messenger: New Media*



Harold Innis

Time and Space Bias

Space-biased media, conversely, seek to obliterate space. They are light and transportable and can be transmitted over distances. They are associated with secular and territorial societies and facilitate the expansion of empire over space.

Paper is an example of space-biased media; it is readily transported, but has a relatively short lifespan since it degrades, and can be easily destroyed or lost.

From *Old Messenger: New Media*

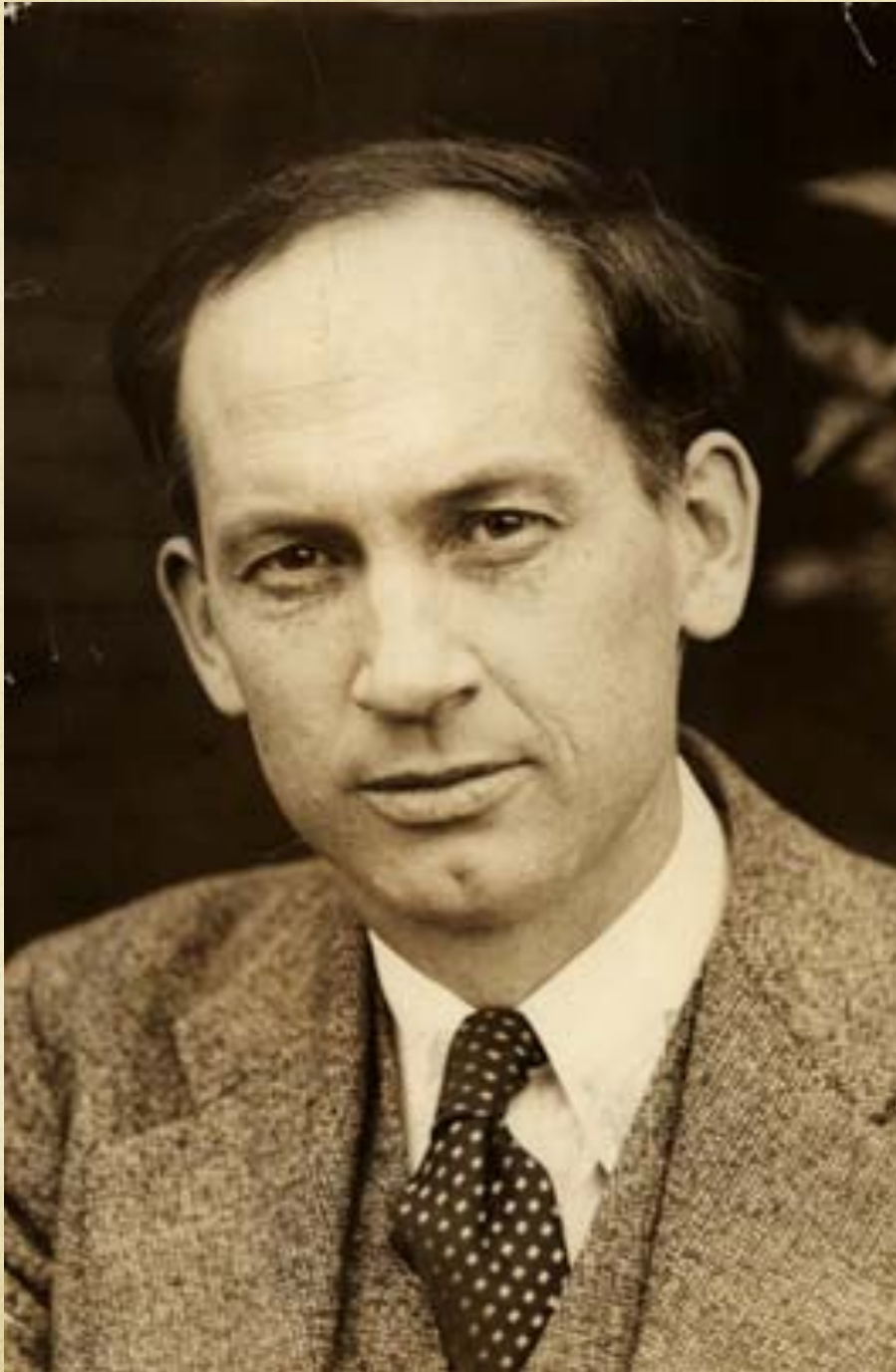


Harold Innis

Time and Space Bias

Innis's historical survey of the role of communication and communications technologies in the rise and fall of empires led him to recognize the societal danger in relying too heavily on either time- or space-biased media. The organization of a society is affected by its dominant forms of communication.

From *Old Messenger: New Media*



Harold Innis

Monopolies of Knowledge

According to Innis, the atmosphere of hostility between time-biased and space-biased media, wherein one tradition marginalizes the other, leads to the creation of monopolies of knowledge. For Innis, the term knowledge "is used broadly, to cover what we would normally classify as knowledge *per se*, literacy and science, for example, and what is more generally assumed to be information, such as economic records, and census data." 5 Those who control knowledge through the dominant media of a given society (be they scholarly, governmental, religious or professional elites) also control reality, in the sense that they are in a position to define what knowledge is legitimate. In this way, monopolies of knowledge encourage centralization of power.

From [Old Messenger: New Media](#)



Harold Innis

Monopolies of Knowledge

Innis was critical of the ethical consequences of political and cultural centralization. He believed that technological change in the 20th century, aided by sophisticated weapons and space-conquering communication technologies, had made greater and greater concentrations of power possible.

From [Old Messenger: New Media](#)



Harold Innis

Monopolies of Knowledge

In both *Empire and Communications* (1950) and *The Bias of Communication* (1951), Innis develops his critique of the spatial centralization of communication in empires (military, theocratic or economic). In such empires, communication flows are one-way, from the centre to the margins. Their centralization and unidirectional flow built and maintained, for example, the powerful Roman and British empires. These strong central powers extended their monopolies to marginal communities, including colonies like early Canada. The monopolization of communication is thus strongly connected to concentrations of political control and economic power.

From [Old Messenger: New Media](#)



Harold Innis

Monopolies of Knowledge

Having recognized how monopolies of power are constructed and maintained through the dissemination or restriction of knowledge, he concluded that the impact of monopolies of knowledge was imbalance in society. Innis went further, saying that an imbalance of power works against the development of a balanced and healthy society by not allowing for competition of ideas, traditions and institutions.

From [Old Messenger: New Media](#)



Harold Innis

Revolutions in Communications Technology

to Innis, all forms of media change via a process that is based on the constant transfer of knowledge, and that the process by which monopolies of knowledge change is related to the rise and fall of empires.

From *Old Messenger: New Media*

Marshall McLuhan

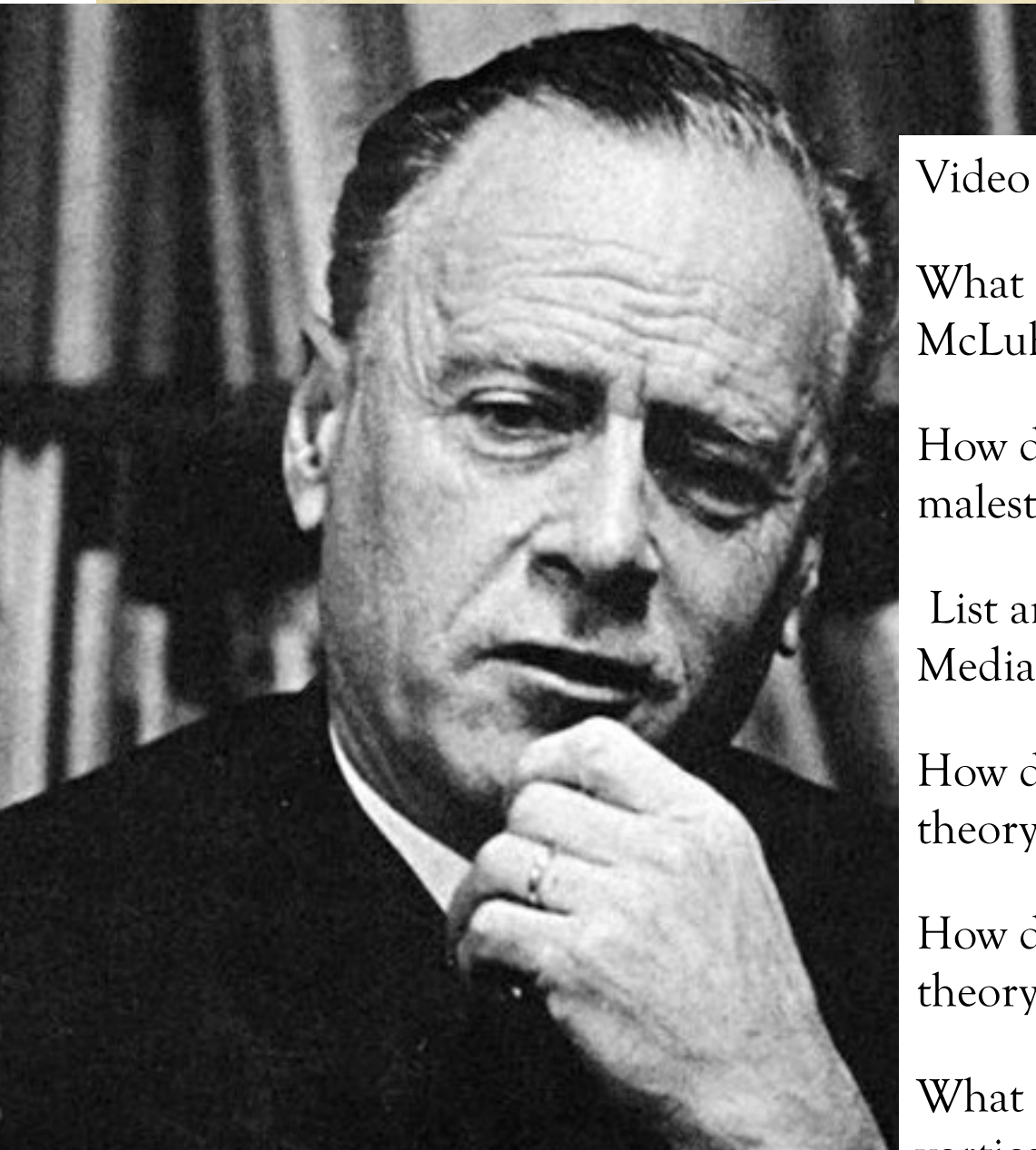


The late theorist of culture and technology, Marshall McLuhan, argued that there have been three basic technological innovations: (1) the invention of the phonetic alphabet by the ancient Greeks which shifted humans out of oral patterns of speech and thought and made way for the dominance of literate forms of communication and instruction; (2) the introduction of movable type by Gutenberg in the 16th century which accelerated this process; and (3) the invention of electric media, beginning with the telegraph in 1844, and followed in succession by radio, films, telephone, and computer. These, argued McLuhan, will ultimately transform all aspects of our social and psychic existence.

Twyla Gibson, Ph.D.
Senior McLuhan Fellow:

[Toronto School of Communication](#)

Marshall McLuhan



Video Questions:

What is the technological malestorm which McLuhan refers to?

How do we (can we) get out of this malestorm?

List and also describe McLuhan's 4 Laws of Media

How does extension play into McLuhan's theory?

How does enhancement play into McLuhan's theory.

What do you think McLuhan means by the vortices of technology?