

Is Technology Neutral?: Space, Time and the Biases of Communication

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It is fitting that CFP2000 is held in Toronto, which can boast of an illustrious tradition of critical communication theory, which has always challenged prevailing assumptions. Unlike their functionalist-oriented neighbors to the South, 'The Toronto School' (exemplified by Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis), created a discourse on technology concerned with the overall mediating effects of technology on social, cultural, political, and economic life.

This discourse was in contrast to the early American tradition of communication theory epitomized by the Chicago School (Dewey, Park and Cooley) and the functionalists (Laswell, Lazarsfeld, Lewin, Hovland, Schramm) (Rogers, 1997). This tradition can be characterized by a transmission view of communications: market-driven; communications as a transportation model in moving static goods (i.e., information as a product and ever-expanding commodity over vast stretches of geography). Some of the biases of the transportation model include: a compulsion towards a centralization of decision-making and authority, while decentralizing work; the persistence of global 'virtual' corporations over local organizations; and a consequent homogeneity of participants and content. Current North American policy on the 'information highway' or knowledge-based economy/society is of the transmission view.

It was Innis (1991) who recognized the central role that communication media play in controlling consciousness, social organization, and cultural expectations. He looked at the relationship between culture and communication media by posing two questions: 1) what causes change in cultures and social institutions? and 2) what promotes cultural and social stability? Through Innis's "bias of communication" thesis, he explicated how communication is biased in terms of its control over time or space. Not only referring to the characteristics of media itself, but to the types of social institutions and cultures they engender, Innis divided media into two "biases": time-binding media (manuscripts and oral communication which have limited distribution potential and favor close communities and traditional authority) and space-binding media (print and electronic media concerned with expansion and control, and the establishment of commercialism, empire and technocracy).

In *Empire & Communications*, (1986) Innis constructed a model to explain how a change in forms of communication can lead to the fall of monopolies of knowledge. Each mass medium is controlled by an elite, which controls what knowledge, and information gets disseminated. Consider who controls our current monopolies of knowledge: Gates, Murdoch, Case, Turner. AOL/Time Warner, Disney, News Corp., Viacom, Sony, Seagram, AT&T/Liberty Media, Bertelsmann, and GE (McChesney, 1999). Innis's model of communication bias inserted an historical approach to communication studies, by asking: what are the processes that are involved in the relationships between social and technological development?; and through inserting the notion of political power into the analysis of media.

This panel, then, brings together some provocative theorists and writers of technology to discuss the biases of digital communication. How has digitization influenced our socio-economic, cultural, and political landscapes? What have been some of the unintended consequences of our technological imperative upon communities – both virtual and real, on urban planning and design? Have digital technologies been reinforced as control technologies? How has digitization reconfigured our environment, shaped democracy, and what are some of its unanticipated consequences?

Santa-Cruz based journalist Paulina Borsook (1999) looks at the dot.com invasion of San Francisco, where “a city whose unique history and sensibility is being swamped by twerps with ‘tude”. A new form of gentrification has hit the city, exacerbating tensions between locals who are being forced out because they can't afford to stay, and young nerdsters who are driving real estate prices beyond the means of ordinary folk. The character of San Francisco – it's diversity, tolerance, arts and alternative orientation – are being chipped away by this digital rush.

One of the characteristics of ICTs is their two-sided nature; while they have the ability to empower citizens, at the same time they make citizens more vulnerable to surveillance and manipulation. Reg Whitaker, York University Professor, (1999) documents everyday occurrences of this - from surveillance cameras in department stores and downtown neighborhoods to high-tech ‘nannycams’. Smart ID cards, debit, cash and other credit cards also create tracking and surveillance regimes. The ethics of the untoward coordination of databases - dataveillance, the corporatization of individual identity, and the capitalistic identification of targeted groups - what Whitaker refers to as the “multicultural panopticon” - are trenchantly discussed. He relates this all to our current culture of surveillance - the tabloidization of news, celebrity cult, and the rise of amateur videos.

Marita Moll, Head of Research and Technology at the Canadian Teacher's Federation, has been an indefatigable critic of Canadian ‘information highway’ policy and one of the ‘usual suspects’ in public interest activities in Canada. Much of her work has countered the rhetoric surrounding the introduction of the Internet into schools. She has argued that we must examine the technological imperative that has been thrust upon our daily lives and resist (or at least question) the acclimatization of the ‘technological high’ (Moll,1997).

References

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