Introduction to the Special Issue on Communications, The Media and Policy in Canada

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Abstract

The complexity of the late-modern globalizing order has accelerated the erosion of time and space and has radically undermined the apparent solidities of borders, identities, and the social relations of production. Hybridity, fluidity, risk, and individuated self-reflexivity are among the concepts that social researchers everywhere have grasped in order to anchor their attempts to apprehend the eruptions and disruptions that condition phenomenologies of the present. Among the most affected social theories are those of communications. The informational and communicational order that was taken for granted even a generation ago has been supplanted by a complex of global networks, mobilities, and flows. Media analysis, which is an important subfield of communications, has undergone particular transformation. From Innis to Angus communications theory has been more than a rich product of Canadian scholarship; the lived experience of space and land, nature and technology has conditioned the very possibility of Canadian social theory. In this way, the emerging contributions to scholarship in politics and communications, profiled in this special issue, are able to take us beyond the postmodern claim that "all that is solid melts into air." While called upon to innovate and re-examine our theoretical frameworks, chosen methodologies, and critical matters of empirical enquiry, we do so on the basis of established research traditions that suggest certain future directions as we attempt to think through media and communications in an increasingly global Canada.

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concepts that social researchers everywhere have grasped in order to anchor their attempts to apprehend the eruptions and disruptions that condition phenomenologies of the present. Among the most affected social theories are those of communications. The informational and communicational order that was taken for granted even a generation ago has been supplanted by a complex of global networks, mobilities, and flows. Media analysis, which is an important subfield of communications, has undergone particular transformation. As recently as the 1980s scholars were engaged in the analysis of "the mass media." The masses – at least as we conceived them in the Twentieth Century – have disappeared and yet nothing has emerged to replace them. Communications theory struggles toward a new sociology. Despite the undoubted challenges, Canadian scholars are at something of an advantage in the late-modern world of communications.

From Innis (1950, 1951) to Angus (1997) communications theory has been more than a rich product of Canadian scholarship; the lived experience of space and land, nature and technology has conditioned the very possibility of Canadian social theory. Grounded in these realities, the emerging contributions to scholarship in politics and communications, profiled in this special issue, are able to take us beyond the postmodern claim that "all that is solid melts into air." While called upon to innovate and re-examine our theoretical frameworks, chosen methodologies, and critical matters of empirical enquiry, we do so on the basis of established research traditions that suggest certain future directions as we attempt to think through media and communications in an increasingly global Canada. This is the core claim of Nesbitt-Larking's "Reframing Campaigning: Communications, the Media, and Elections in Canada." Mindful of the contributions of studies in political behaviour to the analysis of the media in election campaigns, Nesbitt-Larking nonetheless argues that transformations in patterns of ownership, and the impact of global information flows through the Internet as well as the associated patterns of culture and state regulation, need to be taken into account in the exploration of the role of the media in campaigns. The behaviouralist approach is thereby enriched and deepened through taking into account theories of political economy/technology, culture/ideology and discourse, as well as state regulation. The contributions to this special issue exemplify aspects of each of these theoretical contributions.

Howlett's article on the role of the state and regulatory frameworks is a contribution to communications theory. In "Government Communication as a Policy Tool: A Framework for Analysis," Howlett develops a four-fold taxonomy of government communications, grounded in a theorization of government communications as policy instruments. While his taxonomy is illustrated with Canadian instances, it is readily applicable to a comparative setting. Specifying both substantive and procedural goals in government communications policy, Howlett exemplifies their intended policy impact. Procedural communications tools facilitate and animate communication regarding regulations and important information among policy communities. Substantive communications tools more directly regulate who produces what and under what conditions of health and safety, the environment, the labour process, patterns of ownership, and other relevant criteria. Howlett's taxonomy is constructed by indicating that both procedural and substantive communications tools can be used at both the front-end (policy formulation) and the back-end (policy implementation/evaluation) of the policy cycle.

Howlett's contribution is to ground the future analysis of government communications tools into a detailed classification of regulation though communications and the policy process. Makarenko delves into a *specific* controversy in campaign regulation in order to illustrate how

political theory and judicial interpretation have misinterpreted the ideological orientation that underpins the regulation. In "Fair Opportunity to Regulate: The *Charter* and the Regulation of Electoral Speech," Makarenko uses *Harper v. Canada (Attorney General)* to argue that the Supreme Court adopted a liberal orientation, grounded in procedural fairness, rather than the egalitarian orientation of equality of political influence. Makarenko reasons that certain political theorists as well as Canadian jurists have been mistaken in their interpretation of the *Harper* decision as one that was grounded in egalitarian principles. He argues that the Rawlsian liberalism, which the decision drew upon and parallels, limits absolute freedoms, such as the unlimited freedom to spend, only in order to ensure opportunity and not in order to facilitate equality of political influence. With respect to the contributions of both Howlett and Makarenko, it is evident that we require more reflexive and more robust mechanisms for conceptualizing state regulation. In order to assess regulatory regimes in an era that has swung from "reinventing government" to new orthodoxies of business regulation through effective public ownership in less than two decades, it is more important than ever to accurately calibrate how and what the state regulates.

Blidook's "Choice and Content: Media Ownership and Democratic Ideals in Canada," brings political economy to bear on the analysis of newspapers. His article examines the impact of media ownership in Canada on both internal media organization and on how the news is reported. Noting a relatively high degree of corporate cross-ownership and concentration, Blidook reports that Canada's professional journalists perceive a strong impact of media ownership on both the news and opinion content of newspapers as well as upon their own role as media employees. Blidook's public policy conclusion is that the state should simultaneously relax foreign ownership regulations, which he does not regard as influential on media content, while strengthening regulations to limit the market share of media corporations. Blidook's recommendations serve to remind us of both the challenges and opportunities of regulation in an increasingly fluid world of transnational capital and the ever-more permeable character of national political economies.

If the principal orientation of Blidook is on political economy, and that of Howlett and Makarenko on state regulation, the contributions of Bastien, Hicks, and O'Neill deepen our understandings of culture and ideology. Bastien's "Beyond Sex and Saxophones: Interviewing Practices and Political Substance on Televised Talk Shows," is a thoroughgoing analysis into the political content of information, entertainment, and infotainment shows on Quebec television. Using content analysis, Bastien compares the political quality of the interviews in terms of rigour. His data confirm that politicians are significantly less likely to provide direct responses on information shows than they are on either entertainment or infotainment shows. However, contrary to his expectations, Bastien's data show that journalists on entertainment and infotainment shows are more likely to probe non-responses or incomplete responses than journalists on more conventional information shows. When it comes to asking "challenging" questions, both information and infotainment shows score higher than pure entertainment shows. Bastien's research prompts us to rethink the political importance and impact of both pure entertainment and infotainment shows on television, thereby problematizing the boundaries between high and low culture. Methodologically, Bastien's major contribution is to profile the possibilities of sociolinguistic analysis in political science.

Bruce Hicks asks "Do Large-N Media Studies Bury the Lead, Or Even Miss the Story?" Along with Nesbitt-Larking, he questions the capacity of studies in the existing traditions of political

behaviour to grasp the full complexities of media effects in campaign periods. Hicks's article develops an original approach toward assessing the independent usefulness of employing a deeper qualitative methodology toward the interpretation of media content and media effects. Hicks focuses on a paradox: the fact that while large-N quantitative content analyses do not reveal immigration to have been an issue of importance in the Canadian federal elections of 2004, 2006, and 2008, there is nonetheless evidence from the media, notably local media, of the relevance of immigration issues. Hicks uses local media coverage in certain key ridings in which immigration is a campaign issue, revealing extensive coverage of the focus. Campaign events such as Calgary candidate Lee Richardson's gaffe may not register the issue of immigration as an important one using the quantitative methodology of large-scale machine-readable content analyses, but Hicks nonetheless claims that such events may trigger certain "emotional heuristics." Hicks's research recalls Blidook's comment regarding the behaviouralist researchers' claim that we need to understand media influence in "a nuanced manner." Hicks's conclusions remind us of the ongoing importance of reading the local and the particular through deeper more "thick descriptive" qualitative methodologies.

Finally, Brenda O'Neil in her article "The Media's Role in Shaping Canadian Civic and Political Engagement" seeks to uncover at least some of the impact the media has in shaping political and civic engagement in Canada. The findings suggest that more focused attention to the media's role would likely reap significant benefits in furthering our understanding of participation behaviour at the individual level. She asks whether the media play a role in shaping social capital or the political and civic engagement of Canadians, and finds evidence that suggests that they do. She also finds evidence that the specific media employed by Canadians to follow politics and the frequency with which they follow such coverage each reveal an association with the number of activities in which respondents participate. Use of more traditional media – most notably television alone and in combination with newspapers – is associated with lower levels of engagement. Use of the Internet – most often employed in combination with more traditional media types – reveals an association with higher levels of engagement. She suggests that future research – more qualitative perhaps – ought to focus on addressing what it is about that these particular media type combinations that best addresses the needs and desires of those with more limited and more heightened engagement levels. Theoretically, methodologically, and in terms of her findings, O'Neill's research opens up a series of inter-related questions regarding new media technologies (notably the Internet), the new politics of civic and cause-oriented engagement, and the possibilities of qualitative research in media analysis.

References

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