REVISITING THE COMMON ROOTS
of Communication Studies and Canadian Studies

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COMMUNICATION STUDIES IN CANADA AND CANADIAN STUDIES ARE COACTIVE ENDEAVOURS. THEY ARE BOTH INTERDISCIPLINARY AREAS OF STUDY SEEKING TO ACCOUNT FOR CANADA'S DEVELOPMENT AS A NATION AND ALSO ITS RELATIONSHIP – ACTUAL AND POTENTIAL – TO THE REST OF THE WORLD. TO DEVELOP THEIR EXPLANATIONS AND PREDICTIONS, THEY DRAW ON DIVERSE METHODS AND APPROACHES IN BOTH THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND THE HUMANITIES. AND THEY BOTH SEEK TO SHARE EXPERTISE AND TO POOL INTERESTS WITH COGNATE AREAS – OCCASIONALLY IN ALLIANCE WITH ONE ANOTHER.

The advent of radio and television gave rise to the communications scholarship of Harold Adams Innis and Herbert Marshall McLuhan. Insights on media and communications developed by Innis and McLuhan – parallel in some respects, contradictory in others – continue to stimulate new knowledge in both Communication Studies and Canadian Studies. Their work remains a lens through which many non-Canadian scholars view Canadian culture and identity.

More recently, the advent of new media and the Internet has provided an occasion to reflect on the symbiotic relationship of the two areas. The need for such a dialogue is particularly urgent in connection to the issue of the relative autonomy of the Canadian nation-state. An open border with the U.S. and a common currency in North America are now being seriously discussed as a means of extending the practical benefits of expanded trade with the U.S. Canadians are engaged in another stage of the ongoing discussion about the appropriate degree to which Canada can act independently and about the measures that may be justified in extending or restricting that independence. Identity is associated with autonomy because without a distinctive identity, the cultural and social forces for independent action are reduced.

In this article, I consider the potential meaning of public involvement in expanding access to the Internet in the context of two contrasting perspectives on the Canadian identity – those of Maurice Charland of Concordia University and Bruce Powe of York University. There are other voices, of course, but these two reflect rather clearly a duality of visions along various dimensions: francophone and anglophone, the historical and the social, materialist and idealist. Together, the two perspectives provide an illustration of the key issues of the interests and actions of the state in promoting the use of technology, the importation of that technology, and the problematic of national autonomy.

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The federal government's Community Access Program (CAP) is one of the many current efforts in Canada to, in the program's words, "make Canadians the most Internet-connected people in the world." CAP has supported some 10,000 public access computer terminals, mainly by providing one-time funding to libraries and schools to purchase equipment. As a consequence of the program, it is now possible to gain access to the Internet in many public places in Canada. The provincial governments have developed their own programs of this kind. In Alberta, for example, the SuperNet is to be developed by an alliance of public and private organiza-

tions. It will extend broadband services (the "big pipe" of Internet access) to rural and remote areas of the province. All government offices, hospitals, libraries, and schools in Alberta will have access to the SuperNet, with access by homes and businesses to be organized by private providers. The stated goal of this project, along with similar initiatives across Canada, is to become "the most wired jurisdiction." The image is created of a multitude of horizontal ties between and among individuals and groups in Canada.

The first of the two perspectives on the role of public involvement in access to communications technologies is that of Maurice Charland. Charland introduced the term technological nationalism in his article of that name in 1986 in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* (10, 1-2: 196-220). Charland argued that anglophone Canadian nationalism had been given full expression in Pierre Berton's *The National Dream*. He began his article with a description of the opening sequence of the CBC television treatment of Berton's history of the CPR, in which a native Canadian is confronted by a steam locomotive:

> *This television image of a railroad as the "national dream" heroically spanning the wilderness to fashion a state reveals in a condensed narrative the manifold relations between technology and a Canada which can imagine. Here, we are encouraged to see technology as constitutive of Canada, and as a manifestation of Canada's ethos (p. 196).*

For Charland, the nationalism revealed in *The National Dream* was a set of ideas by which the Canadian state sought to "legitimate itself by constituting a nation in its own image" (p. 197). Beginning with the Canadian Pacific Railway, and later with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Canada has existed by space-binding technologies. Charland agreed with Pierre Berton's view that the CPR had been a "national dream," an instance of Canada imagining itself into existence. However, he suggested that an optimistic view of a technologically mediated Canada overlooked the material reality that Canada was economically subject to the U.S. – and in fact had been fashioned for just that purpose. Charland cited the observation by Innis that communications technologies, like transportation technologies, tended to strengthen and extend empires.

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Several decades after the last spike in the CPR had been driven, the Canadian government began using the same transportation rhetoric that had made the creation of the CPR possible, to conceive of a national radio service that would strengthen Canadian social unity. The nation of the CPR, Charland noted, was economic, while the nation of radio was cultural and ideological. Yet the concept of the CPR as a common carrier did not transpose fully into the broadcasting paradigm of radio and television. This discontinuity was the source of what was to become a series of interlocked contradictions in the rhetoric of anglophone Canadian nationalism. Charland argued that, in any case, the technological nationalism reflected in the rhetoric of the CPR and a national radio and television service was futile, because it could not invoke a common culture as its subject:

> *Technological nationalism promises a liberal state in which technology would be a neutral medium for the development of a* polis. *This vision of a nation is bankrupt, however, because it provides no substance or commonality for the polis except communication itself. As a consequence, technological nationalism's (anglophone) Canada has no defense against the power and seduction of the American [sic] cultural industry or, indeed, of the technological experience (p. 198).*

For Charland, the rhetoric of technological nationalism had not created a nation, as its proponents claimed, but an absent nation. At the end of his article, Charland lamented the "dark sun of alienation" represented by the national dream of a technologically mediated nation.

Charland was writing several years before the Internet became popularly associated with significant changes in social structures and practices. The examples of the federal government's Community Access Program and the Alberta SuperNet illustrate another stage of technological nationalism. At each stage, the rhetoric of binding space has been used to describe a Canada of new connections and enhanced communication. The rhetoric of the CPR suggested that by binding space, Canada's constitution as a federation would be consummated. Political will would be expressed in the "demonstration effect" of a large-scale construction project. Similarly, the space-binding rhetoric of radio called forth a national, politically unified consciousness. Radio was to be a mode of socializing citizens. National unity would be accomplished through what Charland calls the "ideal of communication." This ideal has been reflected more recently in the space-binding rhetoric of the Internet. A network of national connections is described, within which the concept of the nation is bound up.

Bruce Powe has written very differently about communications and the Canadian identity. He refers to the technologically mediated nation, not as a "dark sun," as Charland would have it, but as "a tremendous Canada of light," the title of his 1993 book. The contrast in images is quite clear. While Charland, in the tradition of Innis, sees in Canadian communication the outlines of political economy, Powe considers electronic communication to be a psy-

chic phenomenon, parallel with music and spirituality, more in sympathy with McLuhan's perspective. For Charland, technologies of communication are significant for their structuring rhetoric; for Powe, they are converging symbols of new dialogues and novel connections. Powe suggests that the true significance of new media cannot be appreciated until the old media (the written word, dreams, sound recordings, paranormal activities) are considered at the same time. In this view, new and old media reveal in comparison more similarities than differences. The development of new media is continuous with that of old media in its potential support for a flexible conception of citizenship.

Powe suggests that in the communication state, his name for the other side of the absent nation, citizenship is constantly changing. The communication state is not a self-validating rhetoric but a continuously emerging web of connections within which citizenship is defined, in a dialectical relationship to U.S. culture and history:

> *A digital simulation in a computer works through a pattern of light, a pattern of shadows. One could make an imaginative leap: every person also reflects and emanates their own light and shadows, a free-floating side to their personality and a tragic, murderous, power-hungry dimension. We project our darkness and light into the world. The Canadian shadow appears to us in the shape of the United States and the constantly looming prospect of assimilation. We play in a pattern of light to their burdened, darker history (119-20).*

Powe is relatively optimistic about the capacity of wide access to technology as the basis for deepening patterns of democratization. In that, he is in the company of other communications theorists such as Mark Poster and Derrick DeKerckhove. He develops the liberal theme that the Canadian federation may avoid patterns of political domination by emphasizing the process, instead of the substance or content, of communication.

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Charland and Powe address a question that should remain central for Canadianists and communicationists alike: What is the relationship of the Canadian identity to the new connections of the Internet and the state's role in promoting these connections? I believe that some middle ground between Charland's absent nation and Powe's communication state should be explored as our conception of citizenship changes in the era of the Internet, as it undoubtedly will.

Canada, like other federations, can be regarded as an extended effort to reach political and cultural understanding among individuals and groups. That effort is constituted by our communications practices and channels – the "system" by which we interact. The system of communication in Canada is expanding quickly and taking on new aspects of complexity almost daily. We are seeing horizontal ties of interaction develop with the expansion of access to the Internet, along with the associated rhetoric of a more engaged citizenry. These ties will link individuals and groups in voluntary associations, economic activities, and ultimately in the creation of new symbols and narratives of Canadian identity.

The challenge will be to develop new *vertical* ties of citizenship – a dialogue between citizens and their governments. These vertical ties may have the capacity to allow the communication state to become a legitimate conception of the Canadian identity. But they are not bound to do so. Fragmentation may well occur within the confederal and regional framework of Canadian politics. Communications theorist Jürgen Habermas suggests that it is possible that the "systemic processes" of a wired world will lead, not to the global village of McLuhan and Powe, but to something quite different:

> *it is unclear whether an expanding consciousness, that depends on higher order intersubjectivities in an ever wider universe of shared meanings, will be able to span the extending systems, or whether instead the systemic processes, having taken a life of their own, will rather lead to the fragmentation of a multiplicity of global villages unrelated to each other (in G. Balakrishnan, ed.,* Mapping the Nation *[Verso, 1996], p. 292).*

In providing wide access to the Internet, governments seek cohesive national and regional economies. Social legitimation must be part of this process of integration if we are to avoid seeing our new forms of mediated communication lead to new forms of alienation. The study of communications in Canada, as an integral thematic area in alliance with Canadian Studies, can allow us to generate new knowledge about how to ensure substantive progress in the Canadian project of reaching mutual understanding.

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