

Intermédialités

Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques

Intermediality

History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies

Document: Harold Innis's "History of Communications" Manuscript

William Buxton

Numéro 17, printemps 2011

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1005760ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1005760ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Revue intermédialités (Presses de l'Université de Montréal)

ISSN

1705-8546 (imprimé)

1920-3136 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Buxton, W. (2011). Document: Harold Innis's "History of Communications"
Manuscript. *Intermédialités / Intermediality*, (17), 228–231.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1005760ar>

Document: Harold Innis's "History of Communications" Manuscript*

WILLIAM BUXTON

*I cannot but feel that the media of communication has been more important than our general lip service to it has made it.*¹

229

Harold Adams Innis (1894-1952) is recognized as one of Canada's leading intellectual figures. He was born in Otterville, Ontario, in 1894 and studied at McMaster University (then located in Toronto). He served with the Canadian expeditionary force during World War II and was injured in battle at Vimy Ridge. During his convalescence in England, he completed his master's degree at McMaster. Following his return to Canada, he pursued doctoral work in economics at the University of Chicago, where he wrote his dissertation on the Canadian Pacific Railway. He began his academic career in the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto in 1920, remaining there until his death from cancer in 1952. Innis became best known for his studies of how the exploitation of staple products such as fur, fish, lumber, and wheat shaped and directed the path of Canadian economic development. This involved a close

*This introduction has been adapted from William J. Buxton, "Harold Innis's History of Communications Project," in William J. Buxton, Michael Cheney, and Paul Heyer (eds.), *Harold Innis's History of communications*, vol. 1 (forthcoming), Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield, p. 103-111. I wish to thank Ann Innis Dagg, my co-editors, Michael Cheney and Paul Heyer, as well as Andrew Calabrese and Marcus Boggs of Rowman and Littlefield, for giving their permission to publish this excerpt. I am also grateful for the assistance provided to me by members of staff at the Concordia University Library, the McLennan Library at McGill University, the Blackader-Lauterman Library of Architecture and Art at McGill University, Rare Books and Special Collections at McGill University and La Bibliothèque de l'Université Laval.

1. Harold Innis to Anne Bezanson, 6 August, 1943. Rockefeller Archive Center. RF. RG 1.1 Projects. Series 427S-Canada. Box 32. Folder 322. This quote has been published with the permission of the Rockefeller Archive Center.

examination of the impact of European colonial systems on North America, particularly those of Great Britain, France, and Spain. In the later years of his life he turned his attention to the history of communication, with particular attention given to the relationship between forms of media and broader patterns of power and social control.

During the last dozen years of his life, Harold A. Innis assembled a massive set of writings entitled "A History of Communications: An Incomplete and Unrevised Manuscript." Overall, it is approximately 1400 pages in length, with a time span running from ancient India and China to the 20th century, with the 18th and 19th centuries receiving particular attention. Copies of the manuscript can be found at the University of Toronto Archives, at the National Archives in Ottawa, and (in microfiche form) at the McLennan Library of McGill University in Montreal.

The work consists of eight large sections (ranging in size from forty to three hundred pages), accompanied by twelve fragments and short treatments (ranging in size from three to nineteen pages). The first five large sections bear chapter numbers from "IV" to "VIII." The last three large sections appear to correspond to chapters, given their themes and order, but do not bear chapter numbers. This suggests that Innis was still in the process of blocking out the work into specific chapters when he died. That the first chapter is listed as "Chapter IV: The Coming of Paper" suggests that he planned to include three chapters dealing with earlier developments. The fragments at the end of the material suggest that he wished to carry through the analysis into the 20th century, making particular reference to newspapers.

As commentators have been at pains to emphasize, the manuscript largely consists of densely packed factual material and is quite lacking in the occasional theoretical glosses that accompany his other writings on the history of communications. This is not entirely true. Indeed, the document can best be viewed as a set of writings in various stages of development. Some, to be sure, are little more than reading notes. But others are quite well developed and carefully theorized. Giving shape and meaning to the data in question was a framework of analysis that permitted Innis not only to trace recurring patterns over time, but also to juxtapose developments occurring over space. In effect, the work is implicitly informed by a comparative-historical framework, a mode of analysis that was less consistently adhered to in his other major writings.

The excerpt published here is from the first section of Chapter IV, "The Coming of Paper," which begins with the production of paper in China "as early as 105 A.D." and concludes with the westward diffusion of paper-making during

the Middle Ages. While the manufacture of paper and its spread is at the centre of Innis's discussion, he gives considerable attention to the related technologies of ink production, block printing, and the introduction of movable type. He also traces the onset of paper and printing within a number of different socio-cultural contexts, including China, India, Korea, the Muslim world, and Europe. In doing so, he examines how paper and printing were bound up with developments in a broad range of areas including religion, language, news, public opinion, politics, literature, and education. The remainder of the chapter parallels the same general themes, but exclusively within a European context. After detailing how the paper-manufacturing process gained a foothold in Europe—becoming a formidable rival to parchment—Innis examines how paper was linked to the broader process of transformation underway. This involved an examination of key developments, such as the extension of credit, the revival of antiquity, the reformation of the Church, and the rise of the modern state.

231

Abridged versions of Chapters IV, V, and VI will be published by Rowman and Littlefield as *Harold Innis's History of Communications*, vol. 1 (accompanied by Innis's autobiographical memoir), edited by William J. Buxton, Michael Cheney, and Paul Heyer. A second volume, tentatively covering material from chapters VII and VIII, is also under contract. Editing Innis's manuscript has presented distinct challenges. Above all, it was necessary to track down the sources that Innis used and to carefully check his text in relation to the original material to ascertain that his use of quotations was accurate. In order to make the manuscript more readable, we have decided not to use ellipses in cases where Innis omitted words in quoting from his sources. The words that Innis added to his quoted material have been enclosed within square brackets and headings have been inserted.

CHAPTER IV

THE COMING OF PAPER

After experiments with various material the Chinese succeeded in producing paper from textiles as early as 105 A.D. Writing in China apparently began with the use of bamboo "tablettes" and continued to at least 426 A.D. It was followed by the production of paper from broken pieces of silk and finally from old rags. The heavy character of bamboo and the expensive character of silk led to the development of paper in 105 A.D. It spread to Japan from Korea and in the reign of Shōtoku (572-626) paper was made from the bark of mûrier. In 703 four artists were mentioned in the code of Japan as charged with the manufacture of paper. The industry was prosperous from 749 to 756 and in 770 the product used for the transcription of the sacred book of Buddha was of a high quality. In the period 806-9 the government established factories for the manufacture of paper. In the period 877-884 taxes were imposed and paid in kind. The department of Minon became a great centre of the paper industry. By the end of the 9th century a great variety of paper was produced and paper was used extensively.¹ It rapidly displaced other writing materials and provided the background for an extensive printing industry.² A large centralized state with its demands for a large number of documents and the spread of religion with the demands for charms brought an increase in the production of paper and the evolution of block printing. At the end of the 6th century the Imperial library had 37,000 books and in the early part of the 8th century

¹ Augustin Blanchet, *Essai sur l'histoire du papier et de sa fabrication* (Paris, 1900), pp. 5-23.

² For an exhaustive discussion see T.F. Carter, *The Invention of Printing in China and its Spread Westward* (New York, 1925).