

Scientia Canadensis

Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine
Revue canadienne d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine

Scientia
Canadensis

The People's Network: The Political Economy of the Telephone in the Gilded Age. By Robert MacDougall. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 344 p., notes, ill., bibl., index. ISBN 978-0-8122-4569-1, \$55.00

Bryan Dewalt

Volume 38, Number 2, 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1038364ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038364ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Dewalt, B. (2015). Review of [*The People's Network: The Political Economy of the Telephone in the Gilded Age.* By Robert MacDougall. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 344 p., notes, ill., bibl., index. ISBN 978-0-8122-4569-1, \$55.00]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 38(2), 104–105. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038364ar>

All Rights Reserved © Bryan Dewalt, 2015

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

continuer à capter l'attention du public, n'y échappe pas. Cela entraîne évidemment des questionnements sur l'évolution de la conscience politique de l'auditoire.

Tout n'est cependant pas dit : l'étude de l'influence réelle qu'ont eue les émissions sur les spectateurs, l'effectivité du téléroman à agir sur la réalité sociale, ainsi que le rôle que la société elle-même a eu dans l'évolution de la conscience politique du Québec sont encore des chantiers d'étude à l'œuvre et les auteurs le mentionnent bien.

Seule faiblesse de l'ouvrage: il se concentre uniquement sur l'évolution de la conscience politique des francophones au Québec. On soutient que les procédés du secteur de l'information de Radio-Canada, en privilégiant l'actualité locale et régionale du Québec, se distingueraient de ceux de son homologue anglophone et ce dernier serait plus en mesure d'offrir une couverture nationale. Comment la conscience politique des anglophones (ou des anglo-québécois, pour cibler ce groupe précis) et des francophones du reste du pays a-t-elle évoluée grâce à l'influence de la télévision de Radio-Canada depuis 60 ans ? La question n'est pas approfondie. Celle-ci pourtant prend toute son importance lorsque le livre jette un éclairage sur un talon d'Achille de la société d'État: le concept des « deux solitudes » qui existerait entre la SRC et la CBC. La faille est difficile à pardonner, d'autant plus que: « cette étanchéité des réseaux l'un par rapport à l'autre frise le sabotage » (125) et sert de prétexte, encore une fois, à tous ceux qui voient là une raison de revoir la mission de conscientisation politique du diffuseur public ou de lui couper les fonds.

Les prises de position des auteurs sont nuancées : certains reconnaissent qu'il peut être ardu de rester neutre quand il s'agit de la Société d'État; d'autres déplorent le constat qu'on peut faire de la situation. Mais Radio-Canada ne se résume pas qu'à sa télévision et a encore un rôle à jouer. Dans le nouvel écosystème médiatique, la complémentarité des médias traditionnels et des nouveaux médias fait plus que jamais office de voie de salut: l'arrimage des nouveaux médias aux médias traditionnels est essentiel à la survie de ces derniers, et plus particulièrement à celle du service public (171). Cette transformation amènera de nouveaux défis mais la Société d'État pourra continuer à apporter une réelle contribution à la conscience politique et sociale (173): «Les «messes télévisuelles» qui ont caractérisé le service public

audiovisuel ne suffisent plus à assumer l'adhésion des populations aux postulats fondant le service public» (185), il faut passer d'une logique de flux, caractéristique des environnements traditionnels de radiodiffusion, à une logique de bibliothèque dans laquelle l'utilisateur peut à sa guise naviguer dans une somme de contenus mis à sa disposition. La plateforme numérique « Tou.tv » serait donc un modèle de télévision au diapason du nouvel écosystème médiatique. Survivre aux profondes mutations du monde des communications est possible ; que la néo-télévision de Radio-Canada poursuive sa mission de conscience politique, linguistique et culturelle, est aussi possible mais le processus est désormais considérablement plus complexe.

Après plus de 60 ans d'existence, la télévision semble être rendue à la croisée des chemins. En considérant la profonde mutation de l'univers médiatique d'aujourd'hui, le bilan qu'on peut tirer de la télévision de Radio-Canada permet de comprendre l'influence qu'elle a pu effectivement avoir sur la conscience politique. Le livre est donc un outil indispensable pour contribuer au débat sur la redéfinition en cours de la Société d'État.

Dominic Charette, Collège Lassalle

The People's Network: The Political Economy of the Telephone in the Gilded Age. By Robert MacDougall. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 344 p., notes, ill., bibl., index. ISBN 978-0-8122-4569-1, \$55.00.

The decades between 1870 and 1930 saw the transformation of North American society. Settlement was extended across the continent, industries and cities were established and experienced explosive growth. Politically and economically, formerly isolated and relatively autonomous communities were increasingly integrated in national and transnational formations. As readers of Robert MacDougall's excellent study will learn, these processes were abetted by new network technologies that refashioned our sense of space. Rail, telegraph and telephone networks were "new technologies of reach" and were "the nerves and arteries of a new economic order" (7). This new order was marked by the emergence of a new dominant economic and political form, the corporation.

The People's Network is an exploration of this tumultuous era via the contested emergence, growth and consolidation of telephone services

on both sides of the Canada-U.S. border. As indicated in the subtitle, it is one focused firmly on the forces of political economy that shaped both the development of the technology and the structure of the networks that brought it into peoples' lives. In this sense, MacDougall places his work in opposition to a number of alternative approaches to the subject: to a mid-20th century historiography focused on the ascendant position of the American Telephone and Telegraph Co. (AT&T), to the variants of technological populism that periodically re-emerge with the introduction of new communication technologies, and, finally, to a media studies tradition that can neglect questions of political agency and historical contingency. What distinguishes *The People's Network* from all three is a rejection of the idea that the telephone networks that grew up in North America did so in the way that they did because of anything inherent, or natural, about telephone technology.

Instead, MacDougall offers the reader an historical account of a period when a variety of political and economic actors conceived and constructed rival forms of the new network technology. At the heart of this contest were big questions not only about the telephone but about society itself: about democracy, local autonomy, monopoly, and the appropriate size and type of business enterprise. MacDougall argues, largely successfully, that this was "more than just a commercial skirmish." (6). It was instead a "referendum on the organizational transformation of the age." (13).

After an initial comparative study of Kingston, Ontario and Muncie, Indiana, MacDougall proceeds more-or-less chronologically, from the establishment of the Bell Telephone Company in Boston in 1877, through the end of the Bell patent monopoly, the emergence of regulation and competition, the epic, populist struggle between the American independents and AT&T, and finally, the decisive consolidation of power, at the least in the United States, around AT&T's centralized, tightly controlled national system. The core of MacDougall's study is Chapter 4, which covers the rivalry between the Bell interests and the Midwestern independents in the two decades around the turn of the 20th century. MacDougall marshals a good deal of evidence on the differences between a Bell system built around urban exchanges, strict technical standards, high prices, and extensive long distance lines, and locally-financed independents focused on affordable service to small towns and the

surrounding rural areas. In the process he presents excellent data on telephone usage, the structure of the networks themselves, and the varying approaches to technological innovation.

As with any good history, MacDougall also treats the reader to a few telling anecdotes. For example, in 1902 police had to intervene when a convention of independent telephone companies descended into a drunken food fight. In 1905, Bell Canada's neglect of francophone users within steps of its own Montreal head office led to the establishment of the Compagnie de Téléphone des Marchands. In the early years after opening its much-touted transcontinental service in 1916, AT&T handled on average just two calls per day. Finally, at a time when virtually all phones were black, Depression-era Hollywood depictions of the leisured rich were nicknamed "white telephone films."

Although largely successful, there are weaknesses in MacDougall's account. First, given his ambition to present a transnational comparative history, his treatment of Canada is somewhat cursory, depending in large part on a few government reports and secondary sources. To the extent that MacDougall is focused on Canada, his vision rarely extends beyond the confines of southern Ontario and Quebec. This neglect is especially notable in the case of the Prairie Provinces, where the emergence of government-owned monopolies strengthens his fundamental argument and deserves a fuller account.

The second weakness, and one of most interest to readers concerned with the material culture of technology, is MacDougall's limited attention to the materiality of telephones and their supporting networks. Although we get tantalizing glimpses of automatic switchboards, coin-in-the-slot telephones and "French" handsets, we learn about them largely through references to printed sources. Though he argues for "reading physical telephone networks as historical sources in their own right" (143), MacDougall's own research rarely strays from the well-travelled aisles of university libraries and corporate archives.

These qualifications aside, *The People's Network* is a valuable contribution to the historiography of the telephone. It is a worthy addition to libraries and deserves to be widely read by anyone interested in the interconnected history of communication technology and corporate structure in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Bryan Dewalt, *Canada Science & Technology Museums Corporation*