The McLuhan-Innis Field: In Search of Media Theory

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ABSTRACT
Background This article uses archival material to revisit the intellectual and professional relationship between Harold A. Innis and Marshall McLuhan.

Analysis The author suggests four concepts by which to approach questions of influence, collaboration, legacy, and the emergence of intellectual “fields.” Each offers a different view than an analogous term more frequently employed in narratives of intellectual history and legacy. These concepts are oscillation (over influence), fragment (over narrative), discovery (over provenance), and maintenance (over innovation).

Conclusion and implications The author shows how these concepts encourage generative approaches to theory-making more in line with the ethos of early media theory. They move considerations of intellectual history beyond assumptions about individual genius, nationalism, or institutional context, bringing to the fore intellectual contributions of marginalized figures such as Mary Quayle Innis (Harold’s wife) and Margaret Stewart (McLuhan’s secretary).

Keywords Harold A. Innis; Marshall McLuhan; Archives; Intellectual history; Labour

RÉSUMÉ
Contexte Cet article a recours à des documents d’archives pour réexaminer le rapport intellectuel et professionnel entre Harold A. Innis et Marshall McLuhan.

Analyse L’auteur propose quatre concepts pour aborder les questions d’influence, de collaboration, d’héritage et d’émergence de « champs » intellectuels. Chacun de ces concepts propose une façon de voir différente par rapport à certains termes analogues utilisés plus communément dans les narrations d’histoire et d’héritage intellectuelles. Ces concepts sont oscillation (plutôt qu’influence), fragment (plutôt que narration), découverte (plutôt que provenance), et maintenance (plutôt qu’innovation).

Conclusion et implications L’auteur montre comment ces concepts encouragent une approche envers la formulation de théories qui s’accorde mieux avec l’esprit des premières théories des médias. Ces concepts font avancer l’histoire intellectuelle au-delà de suppositions sur le génie individuel, le nationalisme ou le contexte institutionnel, mettant l’accent sur l’apport intellectuel de contributrices négligées telles que Mary Quayle Innis (la femme d’Innis) et Margaret Stewart (la secrétaire de McLuhan).

Mots clés Harold A. Innis; Marshall McLuhan; Archives; Histoire intellectuelle; Travail
**Introduction**

Of the many Marshall McLuhans in circulation, one of the most prominent and perplexing is that of the “McLuhan-Innis relationship.” The two scholars are frequently discussed as the foundational pair of a Canadian tradition of media and communication studies sometimes called the “Toronto School.” There are variations on the story, but the general consensus is that exposure to his senior colleague Harold Innis’ highly original ideas about the history of communication was decisive in crystallizing McLuhan’s thinking about media. This would eventually culminate in McLuhan’s (1962, 1964) field-defining works, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media.* But the relatively short period during which they crossed paths, from McLuhan’s appointment at St. Michael’s College, University of Toronto, in 1946 to Innis’ death in 1952, has led to much debate regarding, for instance, the extent of their professional relationship, the depth of Innis’ influence on McLuhan, and the degree to which McLuhan strategically leveraged Innis’ sterling reputation to promote his own work and standing throughout the 1950s and 1960s (Buxton, 2012; Marchant, 1998; Watson, 2006). Almost everyone agrees, however, that the reverence toward Innis from the otherwise staunchly irreverent McLuhan is puzzling. He always had time to discuss Innis’ ideas and legacy, such as in his review of the posthumously published *Changing Concepts of Time* (McLuhan, 1953a), a stand-alone essay titled “The Later Innis” (McLuhan, 1953b), and a widely read introduction to a 1964 reissue of *The Bias of Communication* (Innis, 1964). McLuhan (1962) also made an infamous remark that his own book *The Gutenberg Galaxy* was but a footnote to Innis’ imperial histories of communication and knowledge. Exaggerating the importance of this or any of McLuhan’s other “probes” is foolish, but it should give us pause because he never said anything like this about anyone else—not even close. Other academic influences received McLuhan’s admiration only under the cover of private conversation or correspondence. 1 Only poets and literary figures such as Poe, Pound, Lewis, Tennyson, and Yeats were titular subjects of McLuhan essays through the 1950s and early 1960s. In trumpeting Innis alongside, he elevated the political economist to such poetic heights.

In addition to McLuhan’s stewardship over Innis’ legacy, there are enough fragments in each man’s archive from the 1946–1952 period to support narratives of intellectual kinship. They lunched with some regularity and discussed pathways for collaboration. McLuhan was the only member of the English department invited to participate in a “values” discussion group organized by Innis that met for nine weeks between February and May 1949. There, Innis, who led a week on “communication and values systems,” and McLuhan, whose topic was “The Arts as a storehouse of values,” were joined by colleagues from political economy, philosophy, history, sociology, and economics (Buxton, 2004). McLuhan wrote a long letter to Innis in 1951 with tantalizing suggestions for future collaborative work. One of these compelling ideas was the “possibility of organizing an entire school of studies” based on “lines appearing” (McLuhan in Molinaro, McLuhan & Toye, 1987, p. 220) in Innis’ (1972) 1950 book *Empire and Communications.* This never came to pass.

The Many McLuhans symposium in September 2018 offered an occasion to use such fragments to think about the lives lived by media theory in its archives, and about
the labour required to sustain and reproduce it. The symposium gathered a diverse array of stories, approaches, texts, questions, disciplinary backgrounds, and collections that, in combination, moved beyond standard modes of scholarly and social communication to create a field of focused intellectual energy. This article arises from that field. It suggests a few avenues through which we might rethink the “McLuhan-Innis” relationship, a relationship that has been so foundational to the idea of a “Canadian tradition” of media and communication theory. But in doing so, we must also move beyond narratives of individual genius and clairvoyance, nationalism, institutional reputation, or comparative assessments of McLuhan’s and Innis’ relative influence or importance. This task does not require that we dismiss these figures or ignore their archives. If anything, we should do the reverse. It is far more interesting to hold frustration and inspiration together, to bounce between them, than to flee to one or the other. This allows us to approach questions of influence, collaboration, legacy, and the emergence of intellectual “fields” with fresh eyes. It also allows us to think more expansively about the role of archival research in the stories we tell about figures and fields. McKenzie Wark (2017) offers a lovely formulation of this idea in relation to Karl Marx:

> Rather than squabble over what is the true and total interpretation, it seems to me more useful to think of the Marx-field that he enables. The Marx-field would then be a matrix of variations on themes, each more or less useful in particular situations. On that view there may be as yet unexplored quadrants of the Marx-field that might be of more help in constructing a critical thought for the times. (p. 15)

With an eye to clearing pathways into new quadrants of the “Innis-McLuhan field,” I employ four concepts that are each meant to improve on an analogous term more frequently employed in narratives of intellectual history and legacy. These concepts are oscillation (over influence), fragment (over narrative), discovery (over provenance), and maintenance (over innovation).

**Oscillation**

Though Innis’ archive is located at the University of Toronto, the bulk of the McLuhan collection resides in Ottawa’s Library and Archives Canada. That McLuhan’s papers are housed so far from his spiritual home of Toronto is peculiar but productive. The distance between the two collections means that any serious engagement with this “axis” of Canadian media theory requires a researcher to spend a lot of time on trains or highways, bouncing back and forth between cities. It requires oscillation.

Oscillation is an interesting concept with which to think about the activities and legacies of these scholars. Their presence in curricula and scholarly discourse oscillates, ebbing and flowing in an almost zero-sum game. When McLuhan is hot, such as in the mid to late 1960s, the early 1990s, and the lead-up to the 2011 centenary of his birth, Innis is cool. When interest in Innis spikes, such as in recent years and during the late 1970s and the late 1990s, that in McLuhan seems to wane. Innis resonates in moments that require systemic analysis and vast time scales, such as recent debates about the Anthropocene, while McLuhan’s work hums along with interest in the body, the senses, and aesthetics, such as during the early days of the internet (he was can-
onized patron saint of Wired magazine in its first issue in 1993). There is a rough and strictly heuristic correlation between McLuhan’s popularity and moments of technological optimism, while in moments of anxiety and pessimism we veer toward Innis. The year 2019 feels firmly Innisian.

But oscillation is helpful beyond these speculative and metaphorical notes. It was something both men thought a lot about. They absorbed it from the discourse of their times. The scientific term “oscillation” moved fluidly throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. It provided an empirical descriptor and a metaphor for relatively new modes of signal processing, such as radio and wireless communication, and emergent scientific paradigms such as cybernetics and information theory (on Innis and oscillation, see Bonnett, 2013). It is foundational, for instance, in Norbert Wiener’s (1948) magnum opus, Cybernetics (see especially the chapter “Feedback and Oscillation”), and it was ever-present in the 1946–1953 Macy conferences inspired by this work. Both Innis and McLuhan especially were keenly aware of these debates. “Oscillation” is the hidden operator at the heart of McLuhan’s preferred term “resonance,” which as Richard Cavell (2003) shows, he discovered through Linus Pauling’s book The Nature of the Chemical Bond. There, Pauling describes Heisenberg’s development of resonance in the study of quantum mechanics:

[T]he resonance phenomenon of classical mechanics is observed ... for a system of two tuning forks with the same characteristic frequency of oscillation and attached to a common base, which provides an interaction between them. When one fork is struck, it gradually ceases to oscillate, transferring its energy to the other, which begins its oscillation; the process is reversed, and the energy resonates back and forth between the two forks until it is dissipated by frictional and other losses. (as cited in Cavell, 2003, p. 148)

McLuhan found in “resonance” a rich concept for understanding the dynamism and density of information and communicative flows in the “acoustic space” of modernity. “Oscillation,” meanwhile, describes the complex interplay of frequencies and the spastic intervals of information exchange in the electric media environment that, McLuhan argued, had thrown human perception into disequilibrium. As he wrote to Innis in 1951, “There is a real, living unity in our time, as in any other, but it lies submerged under a superficial hubbub of sensation. Using Frequency Modulation techniques one can slice accurately through such interference, whereas Amplitude Modulation leaves you bouncing on all the currents” (McLuhan in Molinaro, McLuhan & Toye, 1987, p. 223).

Oscillation also helped McLuhan describe in certain aesthetic forms the “synchronous and contrapuntal interplay” of two forms that create a “resonating structure,” such as Sorel Etrog’s 1974 film Spiral, or, as Andrew Chrystall (2011) suggested, the “two interlocking G’s in the image of a vortex” (sec. 2, para. 4) that comprised the original cover art of The Gutenberg Galaxy. Much earlier, Innis would have come across this cluster of concepts in his home discipline of economic history through the work of Alfred Marshall. In Principles of Economics, which Innis read in graduate school, Marshall wrote about supply and demand’s oscillation in relation to the desired state.
of equilibrium in any market (see Bonnett, 2013). Oscillation, resonance, equilibrium, modulation, frequency—these concepts appear throughout McLuhan’s and Innis’ work because they provided powerful new ways to think about the effects of media—especially signal traffic and information flows—on bodies, spaces, times, and institutions.

Oscillation was a productive concept for both scholars because it moves fluidly between empirical description and analogy. It describes movement to and fro, deriving from the Latin verb *oscillare*, “to swing.” It is the product of, and produces, resonance. It is tightly coupled with movement, vibration, and energy. It thus seems a more useful word for describing the movement of ideas and intellectual culture than more prevalent terms such as “influence.” The latter suggests the unidirectional movement of fully formed ideas, as if, upon engaging with a text, the reader falls under its spell, or upon hearing a speaker, each listener hears the same thing, or that all writers make a concerted effort to “apply” ideas of their progenitors. No doubt these activities sometimes take place. But oscillation captures more of the dynamism involved in the movement of ideas; it is omnidirectional and works across multiple scales.

Intellectual culture moves through different units of varying scales, from data points and sets to concepts, images, aphorisms, questions, quotations, diagrams, interpretive schemas, axioms, theorems, and beyond. Each unit oscillates across spaces and times in different ways. Texts change hands and bounce off of others through discussion and practices of note-taking. Pedagogy in the humanities is based almost entirely on the principle of oscillation, even if we rarely describe it in such terms. We do not know in advance how ideas and insights will resonate in a given environment or with particular students. We cannot anticipate how a new text will activate and recalibrate the knowledge students bring into our classrooms, and a great joy of teaching is to have the ideas we introduce bounce back to us in surprising ways.

Innis and McLuhan were both extraordinarily committed to cultivating such processes in their teaching and research. Each made a habit of reading chunks of different books on different topics from various subjects in the same sitting so as to tune themselves to surprising connections between disciplines and approaches (Watson, 2006). The “probe” was McLuhan’s preferred unit of analysis and dissemination. He would launch probes into the world in the hope they would vibrate and bounce in exciting new ways. Innis, similarly, spoke of his commitment to the oral tradition to all with ears to hear (“[M]y bias is with the oral tradition, particularly as reflected in Greek civilization, and with the necessity of recapturing some of its spirit” [Innis, 1972, p. 190]). Both theorists crafted aggregative rather than argumentative texts, crashing ideas together to open new pathways for thinking. McLuhan used the same principle in designing his famous “Monday Night Seminars” at the Centre for Culture and Technology, throwing together ideas, source material, and the insights of attendees that appeared, on the surface, to have little in common. But in crossing their frequencies, McLuhan hoped to create strange resonances that might push thought and analysis in new directions more suitable for the times. It was a processual method. What moved mattered less than the movement itself and the energy produced. Form over content, ground over figure, channel over signal, medium over message. McLuhan re-engineered various environments—teaching, reading, viewing, and thinking environments, among
others—so as to bring these typically ignored elements to the fore. Only then can we begin to understand the relations between form and content, figure and ground, signal and channel, or medium and message.

Conceiving of scholarly discourse, pedagogy, textual production, and theory in terms of “oscillation” rather than “influence” is more in line with these creative and experimental interventions, which have been so resonant in media theory for the past 75 years. This special issue, and the continuing interest in McLuhan, Innis, and other thinkers in their orbit, testifies to the power of the approach.

Fragment
The intellectual unit that most often oscillates between places and time periods is the fragment. The probe, McLuhan’s favourite rhetorical technique, was based on fragments. As with all modes of disseminative communication, he knew not where or when each aphorism would land, or what it might spark among his listeners or readers.5 Probes move fluidly through his writing, but oral speech was their true home. In fact, many of his texts began as dictations to his long-time secretary, Margaret Stewart. Although McLuhan’s commitment to the spoken word was long-standing (his mother, Elsie McLuhan, was an elocutionist), it is most often understood in the context of what Walter Ong (2012) would eventually call “secondary orality” (p. 285). That is, the return to pre-modern modes of communication engendered by the electric age (see also Ong, 1982). His oral pyrotechnics were thus about analogy and juxtaposition rather than discourse in the tradition of antiquity’s polis or debate in modernity’s public sphere.

As Peters (2011) argues, McLuhan was from the beginning a champion of grammar and rhetoric over dialectic. In the fragment, he found a unit by which to channel medieval grammarians and rhetoricians such as Thomas Nashe, the subject of his Cambridge dissertation, so as to escape the pull of what he perceived as increasingly instrumental modes of dialectic thought (see Peters, 2011, for an in-depth reading of McLuhan in relation to the medieval Trivium). He steadfastly refused to explain or systematize, preferring instead to gather, collide, repurpose, reform, explode, and implode fragments from the history of thought. The more obscure or surprising, the better (there are too many to list; everyone has their favourites). It should have been no surprise when McLuhan appeared in a Hollywood film, Woody Allen’s (1977) Annie Hall—he had been making jump-cuts his whole life. The worst thing we could do to the power of these free-floating fragments would be to systematize, over-explain, or quibble about their provenance and influence. Some of them are dumb but so many contain brilliance and originality. They work best not as clairvoyant truths of a prophet but as crowbars with which to pry open texts and ideas that have long been gathering dust, or, better, which we did not realize were there. Beyond the probes, McLuhan’s reading notes, correspondence, bibliographies, metadata, and other grey literature help us to explore these hidden corners of Gutenberg’s galaxy. Reading and annotation, as John Durham Peters and Alan Galey point out elsewhere in this issue, were perhaps McLuhan’s greatest scholarly and intellectual gifts.

There are suggestive affinities between McLuhan’s fragments and the techniques of gathering and presenting research developed by Innis for his communications texts. Clearly both men were dissatisfied with the conventional modes of scholarly inquiry
and presentation available to them. By the late 1940s, Innis (1972) had largely aban-
donned economic history, of which he was a pre-eminent international figure, to explore
5,000 years of history for his study Empire and Communications. McLuhan said Innis
used the period 4241 BC to 1950 AD as a “laboratory in which to test his hypotheses
and probes” (in Havelock, 1981, p. 10). He experimented with ways to escape the con-
fines of the book, writing short essays that he preferred to deliver orally. And he
dropped almost all pretense to dialectical synthesis or argumentation, preferring ac-
cumulation, analogy, and juxtaposition. His favoured unit was the fragment. These
choices caused a lot of confusion, and they still do. But confusion is opportunity for
the patient and curious. As geographer Andrew Clark (1953) wrote in a review of Innis’
books The Bias of Communication and Empire and Communications:

It is doubtful whether any reader will agree with most, or perhaps many,
of the hundreds of apothegms with which these lectures are sprinkled; but
few students of our society and its culture would not benefit from exposure
to them or fail to find many that, in their pithily penetrating way, may in-
trude more of the light and fresh air of rationality into too facile and easily
accepted generalizations about man, nature, and culture. (p. 142)

These scholarly commitments are most evident in Innis’ “idea file” (published in
1980 as The Idea File of Harold Adams Innis; see Innis, 1980). According to Alexander
Watson (2006), Innis developed the idea file as three “banks” into which he would
deposit research matter, and from which he would draw in preparing publications
throughout the late 1940s until his 1952 death (see specifically pp. 261–278). He exper-
imented with a “cut-up” method of note-taking and textual production many decades
before Burroughs and other Surrealists would popularize the practice (Chisholm, 1970),
and consistently argued that publications such as the Canadian Historical Review
needed to cultivate interpretation and analysis over description (see Buxton, 2007).
To be overinvested in technical matters of provenance (who said exactly what, in which
place, to whom, and when) or to write overly descriptive narrative history was for Innis
to miss the forest for the trees. The questions of how and why were imperative; to se-
riously engage these required modes of thought that were, in his view, becoming in-
creasingly marginal. Hence Innis’ attempts, however flawed and incomplete, to craft
texts with a bias toward discovery.

Discovery
Last year, during a visit to the McLuhan collection at Library & Archives Canada, I
came across a previously unpublished letter written by McLuhan in 1960. It was ad-
dressed to the Director of Research in what was then known as Canada’s Department
of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources. McLuhan was at this point transitioning
from his collaborative work on the journal Explorations to the single-authored studies
of media that would define his career. The first of these, the Ryerson “Project in
Understanding New Media,” was pursued throughout 1959 but filed in June, 1960, one
month after he sent this letter. In this context, McLuhan (1960) wrote:

I have been working on a paper for the coming Economic History
Conference … while working on [my paper] I suddenly realized that staples
are in effect media shaping and patterning homogeneously social life and organization. But media are also staples. Media are natural resources in the fullest and most unqualified sense. But the resource which they constitute and which they tap is the human sensorium itself. ...

One implication of media as staples, is that they are global rather than regional, and the laws of development relating to staples must therefore follow a global pattern. Some very enthralling vistas begin to open here.

McLuhan here uses the language of Innis' early career works on economic staples to describe media (and vice versa). This complicates the usual narrative about Innis' influence on McLuhan (one that McLuhan himself told frequently): that it was Innis' late communication texts that propelled McLuhan's thinking about print culture and mass media; that seeing Innis shift the lens from the content of communication to surfaces and techniques inspired McLuhan to expand these insights so they could account for the media of, first, the “Gutenberg Galaxy,” and subsequently the “Electric Age” (hence McLuhan's quip about being a “footnote” to Innis, as mentioned above). Yet here was a document in which McLuhan claimed that it was actually Innis' economic history work that “suddenly” rendered media in a new light to him—as staples (see also Young, 2017).

You might imagine my surprise and delight to discover such a document. Whether or not this letter was a bit of strategic rhetorical flourish from McLuhan, who might have been fishing for an invite or a grant, is probably unknowable and largely beside the point. What is significant is that we see McLuhan himself changing the origin story and moving the goal posts. It is an example of him actively revising his previous reflections about his relationship to Innis—flagged because it is a good example of the way media theory moves, of how it is contingent, amorphous, protean, and always information. Media theory is less about origins, genius, prophecy, or canon than it is a moving target, a kaleidoscope of aphorisms and ideas—raw material we use to make sense of the times (whether ours or theirs). When it gets too rigid, things need to be shaken up; our objects of inquiry and historical circumstances demand it.

When we drift amid the papers we make media theory anew. Something like the “Innis-McLuhan relationship” has always been primarily a media effect, arising more from archival matter and imagination than the lived experience of these figures. We know they were friendly but not particularly close, that they discussed collaborating, took part in reading groups, and assigned each other’s work in their classes. We know that Innis gave McLuhan a signed copy of The Bias of Communication upon its publication in 1951. And we know this only from archives, where we discover fragments and follow the resonances. We oscillate. And for people like Innis and McLuhan, this was the point of the whole endeavour: to bend and fold time and space (just like the media to which they were attuned), to carve new trajectories through the past and into the future. In so doing, their scholarship could reflect on and leverage the biases of the media that shaped their thought. Both men spent their scholarly lives in search of these moments of discovery and renewal. Evidence abounds of the pleasure they experienced when successful. Witness McLuhan writing to Walter Ong in 1962, just prior to the publication of The Gutenberg Galaxy:
Look at page 79 of Ed[ward T. Hall]’s *The Silent Language*. Is not our approach to media the one indicated there? i.e. all technologies as ablations of sense and faculty—all in the ablative case? And all acting as separate closed systems that re-enter our sensibilities with metamorphic power? All my media work has assumed this. But who else assumes this approach? (McLuhan in Molinaro et al., 1987, p. 285)

Or Innis (1941), with mind afire, in a letter to colleague A.H. Cole in 1941, at the onset of his decade-long inquiry into media and communication history: “I have been very much interested in the newspaper industry and it is clear that its role in fostering the spread of knowledge is very much more complex than appears on the surface. The same must be said for other forms of communication. But this is by the way.” Similarly, the exuberance of a young McLuhan writing to Innis in 1951 is palpable, as is the warmth of Innis’ response even if it was characteristically aloof.6

All disciplines are regenerated through archival discovery; this is not unique to media theory. But archives do seem to have a particular purchase over the imagination of communication and media studies scholars. McLuhan and Innis were no different. This is probably because archives are literally made of the stuff that comprise our objects of inquiry: paper and print, scripts and classification systems, files and seals, boxes and labels. Both theorists were as much interested in form as in content, and so, now, are those of us who chase these figures down. We look at these collections and know there must always be something to find or decode, patterns to recognize and triangulate. And thus has come a trove of archive-centred scholarship on everything from McLuhan’s letters to Innis’ field notes, the Ford Foundation grant that led to *Explorations*, and beyond. The University of Toronto acquisition of the McLuhan library, the occasion for the Many McLuhans symposium, marks a new addition to this corpus. From the other end: it should be of no surprise that thinkers who were so occupied with questions of communication and mediation would take a particular “meta” interest in the organization of their papers (see Alan Galey’s contribution in this collection on McLuhan’s homemade dustjackets). This attentiveness would shape in some way how they worked. Innis’ idea file was inseparable from the ethos of discovery that characterized his work; McLuhan’s probes were launched similarly.

Cornelia Vismann (2001), channeling Derrida’s (1998) seminal ideas about the archive, wrote beautifully about the historian’s “love of ruins.” And it is among archival ruins and fragments that we search for media theory, which is a name we project back onto a fluid complex of ideas that has never behaved like disciplines are supposed to. It is hard to pin down because that is the whole point. It revels in the dance of capture and escape between centre and margin, old and new, standardization and creativity. The movement of this dance is why we keep coming back, turning over documents as we turn over soil in a garden year after year. Too often we think of disciplinary and intellectual histories as a fixed set of documents or texts. We narrate using concepts such as influence and move in search of provenance. Targeted search has its uses, but we must not forget to sometimes wander and drift. The McLuhan and Innis papers are wonderful examples of how archives are zones of re-generation and possibility.7
Maintenance
The final section of this article reminds us that all of the activities so far described rest on a vast infrastructure of maintenance, repair, and care. If a basic premise of media theory is that archives are as much about form (the media that process, store, and transmit information) as about content, our thinking about such matters has been less attentive to a hidden third that sustains the coupling of form and content: the

Figure 1: Harold Innis’s reading notes (c. 1939)

Source: Harold Adams Innis Personal Papers, B1972-0003, Series 6, Research Notes. Box 007, File 03, University of Toronto Archives
hand that inscribes, selects, deletes, orders, and otherwise gives shape to the collection (on hands and information work, see Robertson, 2017).

Traces of handedness are everywhere in archives, even if we rarely give them much notice. When we do, typically the hands of guru figures capture our attention. It is a powerful thing to see the handwriting of such figures for the first time. At the “Many McLuhans” symposium, Andrew McLuhan, grandson of Marshall and son of Eric, spoke eloquently of encountering both men’s handwriting in the McLuhan personal research library not long after Eric’s passing. Marginalia evokes melancholy because it indexes an absent hand. As Andrew described, attempting to decode Marshall’s shorthand comments is equally pleasurable, irritating, and sad. But these are not the only or even the most important hands we find. Mary Quayle Innis’ hands, for instance, are everywhere in the Innis archive: steady and discerning, struggling to establish order amid the chaos of the papers. In a file of her handwritten notes, we find touching recollections of Harold’s childhood, his social comportment, and his work habits, such as that he “never threw anything away” (M.Q. Innis, 1958). His desks were famously piled high with paper, but his proclivity for filling spaces and surfaces to the brim is exhibited even in his handwriting. He crammed individual sheets of foolscap with virtually incomprehensible prose (see Figure 1). The contrast is striking between these tortured scribblings and Mary’s clear and precise script (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Mary Quayle Innis’ file note on Oswego, NY (c. 1952)

Even amid the tragedy that befell the Innises in 1951, when Harold fell ill, we find Mary’s steady hand attempting to hold the intellectual and administrative projects of her husband together. The content of the above file note is inconsequential. It is an obscure reference to Oswego, NY, that, Mary notes, should be appended to any future edition of Harold Innis’ *The Fur Trade in Canada*. More striking is other side of the note (see Figure 3).
Because the default mode of narrating intellectual history and culture is to group things according to the discourse of innovation—focusing on ideas, influence, texts, schools, or individuals—archives are almost always named after individuals or institutions. But Mary’s steady hand here reminds us that none of this activity is possible without administrative, secretarial, domestic, and emotional labour. When Harold took his famous “dirt research” trips throughout the 1920s and 1930s, for months at a time, Mary not only tended to the home and their children, but also helped plan the trips (Watson, 2006; on Innis’s dirt research, see van Wyck, 2013; Young, 2017). In spite of a promising scholarly career, Mary spent far more time, until Harold’s death, indexing and editing his works than writing her own. A recent essay by Donica Belisle and Kiera Mitchell (2018) builds on J. David Black’s (2003a, 2003b) earlier research on Mary Quayle to emphasize that, in addition to her important editorial and administrative contributions, Mary’s social and caring labour enabled Harold’s career to advance rapidly. She not only raised four children and performed the bulk of domestic labour at the Innis house, but also played an important role in hosting University gatherings, as a member of various “faculty wives” clubs, and by accompanying Harold to social and professional events associated with his increasing stature at University of Toronto and beyond (Belisle & Mitchell, 2018). Such accounts echo recent scholarship that centres similar stories of the “founding mothers” of American communication research using feminist standpoint theory (Dorsten, 2012) and assemblage theory (Ashcraft & Simonson, 2016; Rowland & Simonson, 2013). We ought to continue revisiting the emergence, formation, and historicizing of media theory through the lens of the administrative and reproductive labour overwhelmingly performed by women such as Mary Quayle and obscured from conventional accounts of the field’s history.
Stephen Jackson’s (2014) “broken world thinking” (p. 221) argues that maintenance and repair are central but neglected moments in our individual and collective relationship with technology and the built environment. His insights have been highly influential in science and technology studies (STS) and infrastructure studies, most notably in a research collective, “The Maintainers,” organized by Andrew Russell and Lee Vinsel (2016, 2018). These insights have allowed STS to forge productive linkages with, or in some cases discover, the trove of empirical and theoretical studies from feminist anthropology and Marxism that centre domestic, emotional, affective, and reproductive labour (among many others, see Dowling, 2007; Federici, 2012; Hoschild, 1983; Huws, 2001). The goal is to correct the long tradition of thinking about technology only in terms of innovation and genius (typically associated with men or masculine traits). This mirrors calls across media and cultural studies to think more about distribution and infrastructure to complement traditional emphases on production and consumption (Parks & Starosielski, 2015). The shift to maintenance brings stories of workers, partners, associates, and interns from the margins to the centre, offering views on economies of labour and care that fall along predictable fissures of race, class, gender, and ability (Mattern, 2018). We should similarly consider intellectual culture in terms of maintenance and repair. Like any large technical system, ideas, fields, traditions, and curricula rest on infrastructures of processing, storage, and transmission. This involves techniques and technologies that mediate knowledge and information but also the hands that facilitate the operation of those techniques and technologies. This is how we should understand the traces of Mary Quayle’s hand in the Innis archive—not simply as “support” for Harold’s cognitive and intellectual work but as central to the archive’s conditions of possibility and influence.

Mary Quayle and other “maintainers” of intellectual culture—archivists, librarians, but also departmental administrators, research assistants, editors, translators, publishers, and custodial staffs that keep buildings that house people and information functional—are “border” figures. They exist at the margins of the stories we tell about knowledge and intellectual traditions or “schools,” yet they also draw borders around traditions and figures, performing vital acts of curation, selection, reduction, and transposition. Quayle kept an ongoing archive of revisions, additions, and addenda that would need to be made for each of Harold’s major publications. She served on committees tasked with establishing the official Innis fonds at the University of Toronto, and with exploring the feasibility of publishing Harold’s unpublished works, such as one organized by the Canadian Radio and Telecommunication Committee in the late 1960s. This is a complicated legacy. As Watson (2006) points out, almost any trace of the personal or complicated aspects of Harold were excised from the papers before they were deposited at the University of Toronto to become the official Innis fonds. This work of selection was supervised or undertaken by Mary, though it is unclear whether she did so at the request or direction of Harold. The CRTC committee drew heavily on the work of another “border figure,” Elspeth Chisholm, a journalist and researcher who spent years working on the Innis archive. Until recently, her work remained largely forgotten, hidden in the shadows of the Innis fonds and the small Chisholm collections at the University of Toronto and Library & Archives Canada.
Chisholm was one of the first to parse Innis’ monumental “History of Communications” manuscript (Buxton, Cheney, & Heyer, 2014), determining that the scholar used a peculiar cut-up method of notetaking and even textual composition. She offered speculations, in a 1970 memo entitled “Innis’s Method of Working,” about the rationale and, importantly, effects of this mode of composition on the reader (see also Young, 2020). The collection of Chisholm’s papers regarding these projects and her work as a journalist for the CBC remain largely under-explored; thinking about maintenance and repair (parsing, shifting, translating, and transposing the data found in Innis’ infernally illegible handwriting must certainly be considered in terms of “repair”) brings forward her legacy as a vital figure in the emergence and stewardship of media theory in Canada and beyond.

The figure of McLuhan enshrined in intellectual histories of media studies also had and has a number of marginalized but essential “maintainers,” most notably, his long-time secretary, Margaret Stewart. McLuhan famously dictated correspondence and working notes to Stewart, who took them down via short-hand, transcribed them using a typewriter, and filed them according to hers and McLuhan’s idiosyncratic system. McLuhan and his collaborator on the book *From Cliché to Archetype*, Wilfred Watson, dictated their “dialogue” to Stewart, from whose transcripts the manuscript would be derived (Marchand, 1998). But Stewart’s contributions were not limited to passive transcription and filing. As McLuhan’s biographer Phillip Marchand (1998) notes, “it was she who corrected the grammar and untangled some of the rougher syntactical knots in McLuhan’s dictated sentences” (p. 199). Stewart also “protected his time and energy as much as she could . . ., often shielding him from bad news or problems in connections with the Centre for Culture and Technology at U of Toronto” (p. 199). After McLuhan’s 1980 death, Stewart (1981) prepared a comprehensive bibliography of his published works that clocked in at 112 pages, published in part in this journal. Almost none of the hundreds of academic studies and biographies of McLuhan mentions Stewart at all. When she does appear, it is in passing.

Considering such figures encourages us to adopt a wider vocabulary to describe archives, not only in terms of collecting, filing, depositing, or retrieving, but more precisely in terms of gathering, selecting, culling, excerpting, pruning, deleting, segmenting, summarizing, ordering, contextualizing, sorting, repairing, tracking, and so on. These activities continue long after a collection is established, and they continue between visits of researchers. Like all collections, media theory’s archives are time-binding media that require maintenance, repair, and care to function as such. We should therefore look with curiosity and hospitality toward the hands that surprise, support, confound, and care for our disciplines and our histories. This article has mentioned some important figures, but there are many more: Innis’ secretary Jane Ward; the many graduate students and assistants at McLuhan’s Centre for Culture and Technology; hundreds of editors, publishers, and translators in Canada and around the world; archivists such as Harold Averill and Sharon Larade, to whose expertise and stewardship this early career researcher is so indebted. So many stories are yet to be told. These figures are almost never discussed when we think about “media theory,” but without their work there would be no media theory to examine, explore, apply, or extend.
Conclusion
In this article, I have suggested four concepts—oscillation, fragment, discovery, and maintenance—and a few ways of deploying them that will, I hope, push our thinking about intellectual history in new and productive directions. In shifting our gaze from the centre to the margins, we move beyond the sound bites and stories about genius and clairvoyance. We enter into a more dynamic relation with foundational figures of media theory; we recast and remake this field using fragments and debris of the past, moving backwards into the future. We piece together kaleidoscopes not of who these figures were or why they mattered, but what they can tell us about ourselves, our pasts, and our futures—as individual scholars and as participants in a complicated tradition. Such an ethos has been formative for thinkers in this lineage, of which McLuhan was the most famous: against standardization, away from rigid borders, and toward new explorations.

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Notes
1. Examples include McLuhan’s notes in letters to Walter Ong about affinities between his work on media and Edward T. Hall’s anthropological approach (McLuhan in Molinaro, McLuhan, & Toye, 1987. See further discussion in the section titled “Discovery”).

2. For a withering critique of assumptions implicit in conventional narratives of Canadian communication thought—nationalist and intellectual alike—see Hamilton (2010).

3. I owe this formulation to Ira Wagman.


5. For the seminal take on the power of disseminative communication, see Peters (1999, p. 33–62).

6. Innis’ (1951) letter read as follows:
   Dear McLuhan: Needless to say I was very much interested in your letter and, if you have no objections, I would like to have copies typed for circulation to one or two of our mutual friends.
   I would like to see your views elaborated since they seem very important [and] could be used as a basis for general discussion. I was interested in your remarks on Deutsch and his views as expressed in your pamphlet. I would be very pleased if you would put me on your list of people receiving copies of the mimeographed sheet.
   I was sorry not to have answered your letter at an earlier date but I have only recently escaped from the demands of the Royal Commission.
7. Such an understanding of archives owes much not just to Derrida (1998) but also the burgeoning “history of archives” subfield. See Yale (2015) for a comprehensive overview of contributions and debates.

8. Mary Quayle Innis (1935) produced an excellent book titled An Economic History of Canada, which circulated widely as an introduction to the “staples” approach to economic history associated with Harold. A number of essays followed. Later Quayle Innis (1951, 1952) would produce a two-volume history of Canada, Changing Canada. See Black (2003b) and Belisle and Mitchell (2018) for the most comprehensive discussions of Mary Quayle Innis’ life and career.

9. Marchand (1998) describes the wrenching scene of McLuhan, having recently suffered a debilitating stroke, returning one evening in 1979–1980 to his Centre for Culture and Technology. Corinne McLuhan had earlier telephoned Stewart at her home, requesting that she aid Marshall in retrieving some files. When Stewart arrived, she recalled, the centre was “just a complete garbage dump. … All of the records I had made for McLuhan were in a garbage heap. I don’t know what happened to all his stuff, but when I saw it I just felt my whole life fall apart. I said to Marshall, ‘Do you want me to help you?’ and he put his arms out and then he came over and he hugged me. It was pitiful. It nearly tore me apart.”

References


