

Canadian Communication Association - Panel 2015

Invention and Innovation: Canadian Broadcasting Pioneers and Beyond

This panel focuses on the active roles assumed by Canadians across the country in developing new media in the transition from telegraphy to radio to television and beyond. Innovation, invention, early training and a willingness to experiment characterizes Canadian media growth at each stage. This innovation provided a basis for both information and entertainment media across the country. This approach to media history has been sidelined as the first-person perspectives of oral histories has largely given way to the complexity of theoretical attention to actor-networks (Law & Hazard; Bijker et al.), public spheres (Schudson; Dahlgren), cultural circulation (Lee & LiPuma; Goankar & Povinelli) and imagined communities (Anderson; Warner). If anything, too little attention has been paid to the work of individual workers and innovators in the emergence of digital and broadcast media, so that past emphasis on the “policy reflex” in Canadian communication research (Wagman) has continued to attend to careful, structural analysis of policy implications rather than novel, empirical research into the contemporary scene of media change.

This research project will examine the history of the emergence of Canadian broadcast technologies, with a view to transferring past media history projects to the present digital age—as a model for future oral histories and interviews with new media pioneers and innovators. Primarily focused on transcribing and examining existing interviews recording the perspectives of Canadian broadcast radio innovators, the project will also conduct some original interviews with more recent leaders in Canada’s digital communications industry to provide historical comparison, and to spur interest in completing and continuing earlier Canadian media history projects. By investigating pioneering broadcasters at the centre of the last century of communication technologies’ transformation, and focusing on core elements of the catalysts of conversion from one medium to the next, the research will examine the role that these innovators had on the Canadian broadcasting scene and the technology as a whole. By using archived interviews from the Canadian Communication Foundation (CCF) Fonds and the Kenneth Bambrick Fonds, the research will encompass a wide range of innovative and historically significant perspectives on this process of technological change in Canada and the ever-evolving role the medium has held within Canadian social and cultural history.

Innovation and Invention: The active role of early innovators in the Canadian media landscape

Anne MacLennan, Elizabeth Edwards, Rebecca Foley

Innovation and invention clearly played an important role in the development of the Canadian media landscape. The first generation of broadcasters were influenced by their work and training in the military. The commercial and public broadcasters interviewed were, in the early days of radio, founders and adopters of new technologies. This research relies upon both archived interviews from the Library and Archives Canada and new interviews documenting more recent innovation. Among the earliest recollections are those of Victor Morris Chestnut, who enlisted in 1916 at the age of 15 and received training as a signaller in the army. After the war he worked in Morse code first on the East coast in ship-to-shore communication, then the West on forest patrol operating telegraph for aircraft and finally after a “garden party demonstration” for the Governor General made the leap to broadcasting (Chesnut). Other well-known broadcasters, such as Gordon Sinclair moved from news in Toronto, to Niagara Falls, Oshawa, Fredericton to Montreal. He moved from news to sports to more prominence as a “morning man” and finally management to a personality newscaster and editorialist (Sinclair). These innovators moved with the changes in technology and formats and it was this fluidity that permitted the distinctive growth of Canadian media that was not directed by major networks (at least initially) as was the case in the United States. The unique contributions of these individuals introduced Canadian audiences to new technologies and programming. These early trendsetters were professionally trained in radio and wireless communications, but also worked as entertainers. They needed to be just as skilled in the art of showmanship and entertainment in order to generate and maintain audiences. They were not only visionaries who gave voice to new technologies, but also served as a medium that connected people through the technology, instilling an essence that allows people to connect through the technology still existing today. Today, many of these technologies and techniques from the past generations are still being used by contemporary broadcasters.

The research includes original interviews with recent media innovators, but also relies upon existing interviews that document the perspectives of Canadian broadcast radio and television innovators. The comparison of the key skills and motivations of the agents of change within the media allows for historical comparison with more recent leaders in Canada’s digital communications industry. By investigating pioneering broadcasters at the centre of the last century of communication technologies’ transformation, and focusing on core elements of the catalysts of conversion from one medium to the next, the research will examine the role that these innovators had on the Canadian broadcasting scene and the technology as a whole. By using archived interviews from the Canadian Communication Foundation (CCF) Fonds and the Kenneth Bambrick Fonds at Library and Archives Canada, the research will encompass a wide range of innovative and historically significant perspectives on this process of technological change in Canada and the ever-evolving role the medium has held within Canadian social and cultural history.

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Local to National: Building Canada's media landscape

Andrew Monti, Doug Wintemute

The growth of the Canadian media landscape is marked by the mobility of its innovators and broadcasters across an East-West axis. For almost a century, the varied careers of Canadian media workers have been marked by movement and change. Michael Hanson started with CFUN in Vancouver in 1963, moved to St. Catharines, Ontario, to Calgary, Edmonton and then in a major move went to work for the Bureau of Broadcast Measurement, where he became vice-president (Hanson). The character of the media, its measurement and regulations has been influenced by the transitory nature of the careers of Canadian media workers. The pull has not always been to central Canada, but effectively moved media workers across the country making for a Canadian feel to the media apart from the regional and local differences. Vern Dallin started out as commercial manager at CFQC in Saskatoon, later became president of the Western Association of Broadcasters and finally president of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters (Dallin). Michael Heinsmith was CTV's first national program director and later a vice-president, but got his start in United Nations radio in New York followed by work on CBC television when it went on the air in 1952 in Toronto and then Winnipeg (Heinsmith). The geographic mobility of the media industry's workers and management was paralleled by the movement from one medium to another. The move from radio to television was almost instinct, but many of the active workers in the field, especially in news and sports made the transition back and forth between print and broadcast media. The experimental and innovative aspects of Canada's early media were as fluid as the current digital media. This spirit of change and movement allowed for the evolution of an industry that suited Canada and its need to expand across a large space. The mobility within Canadian media allowed for not only the movement of people, but the transit of ideas and influences.

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From radio to television and beyond: Transitions from one medium to the next in Canada

Paul Moore, Jessica Horta

Fluid connections from one medium to the next are essential to the experience of Canadian media. The boundaries between radio, television and other media were always very permeable and permitted the transfer of ideas, technology, programming and personnel across the boundaries between varied media. There are dramatic examples within the industry of some of the influential people in the field, such as Ernie Rose. Ernie Rose started with radio station CKMO at age 12 as a technician, announcer and disk jockey, soon became chief engineer, moved to CBC television in Toronto, returned to Vancouver to set up its first television studio (Rose). Gordon Sinclair, who had a long and celebrated career in Canadian media, started at *The Toronto Star*, moved to CFRB and was part of the long-running news television program, *Front Page Challenge* (Sinclair). His son had a long-running career mostly in radio and centred largely in Montreal, where his voice and editorial commentary were well-known. The transition from one medium to the next is considered an important aspect of the digital world, but this transition was pre-dated by the jumps from newspapers to radio to television. More famous than the Canadian examples are some of the showmen of the early years of television that contemporary viewers would consider an uncomfortable fit, such as Ed Sullivan who made the early transition from radio to television, much like the magicians and ventriloquists who moved from vaudeville to radio. The elements of the preceding medium find their way to the next and only the most relevant elements remain. The experiences of the innovators in the field mark the changes and transitions in the media as technology frames the possibilities.

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