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# COMMUNICATION IN HISTORY

TECHNOLOGY, CULTURE, SOCIETY



DAVID CROWLEY & PAUL HEYER

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# COMMUNICATION IN HISTORY

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DAVID CROWLEY & PAUL HEYER  
*McGill University* *Simon Fraser University*

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**For Don Theall**  
***Teacher, scholar, and friend***



# FOREWORD

Willard D. Rowland, Jr.

The historiography of communication is undergoing its second important shift. Students of contemporary media and culture are increasingly interested in the long-term environment of human experience that frames modern communication, and that interest is reshaping the study of history in the field. This anthology, by David Crowley and Paul Heyer, with its particular structure is a crucial and long overdue contribution to that reformulation.

For much of its initial life, communication history was the story of the press, typically rendered as the biographies of great publishers or newspapers, or of other specific media institutions and major figures, as in the chronicles of particular networks, media moguls, or film genres. The best such work, though generally in the minority, tended to situate its narratives in a broader social context, examining, for instance, the relationship between the press and changing forms of democracy, between film and sociocultural experience, or between the electronic media and political economic patterns. The first significant shift in communication historiography was to make such broader considerations of politics, law, economics, and culture much more regular, intimate elements, to weave their threads more tightly into the tapestries of particular journalism and media histories.

If that first major shift was to broaden the horizontal frame of reference, to situate media history in a wider range of social institutions, the second major shift is to extend the frame vertically, to consider the broader story of media institutions against a much deeper chronological backdrop of the whole of human history, to examine the role of communication in the development of the human species and its forms of civilization.

It is in light of that latter shift that this book should be considered. The editors take their clue from the pioneering work of such scholars as Walter Ong, Elizabeth Eisenstein, and Harold Adams Innis. Those communication historians share a keen interest in the deep civilization context of all principal forms of communication technologies, thereby encouraging a much richer understanding of the present, rapidly changing experience.

There are several key principles of this school of communication historiography that are well reflected in this book. First, this approach perceives all contemporary media and communication technologies as extensions of basic, innate human communication capacities. It refuses to

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abstract contemporary forms of media hardware and uses—television cameras, personal computers, and satellites—seeing them instead as part of a long, complex process by which human beings are continuing to work out their particularly strong skills and instincts for creating systems of meaning and symbolic interaction. In this light, modern media technologies are only the latest, albeit highly significant, forms of ancient human communication technologies that include speech, gesture, drama, and social ritual of all kinds.

Second, as those different “technologies” have variously held sway during different periods of human experience, they have had differential impact in the defining characteristics of the species’s capacities. It appears that the very cognitive structure of the individual human being and the formal patterns of human social relations are intimately linked to the forms or systems of communication that are predominant in given eras. An oral culture, without writing, print, or electronic media, seems to be “biased” toward a particular pattern of sensory and expository capacity that encourages ways of seeing, hearing, and, indeed, knowing that are remarkably different when other forms of communication are more prominent. Over time those tendencies seem in turn to favor and encourage major changes in social organization, influencing, if not defining, choices among options in political, legal, religious, and economic structures. The whole of human experience, therefore, seems to depend greatly upon the form or forms of communication that are most in ascendancy during any era.

Third, if these relationships between communication systems and broad patterns of human thought and experience are so strong, then the story of communication is much more central to human history than the formal academic discipline of history itself has recognized. Since the late nineteenth century, history in the academy has been conventionally apportioned among the other major fields of social and humanistic learning that were also invented at about the same time. That is, we have had several histories, as in political history, social history, economic history, and even cultural history. Each of these has contended for primacy of place as the essential history, the substructural history upon which all the others are built. But, now, with the advent of a deep-civilization perspective in communication history comes another contender. In its emerging form, contemporary communication history raises the prospect that communication patterns, systems, and technologies are not just important, but central and indispensable to human history, and that the other formal branches of history may have to be rewritten in its light.

Reduced to such principles, the current form of communication history has deep and far-reaching implications, not only for history itself, but also for communication research and media studies. At the very least it helps reiterate the importance in the academy of communication studies, underscoring the centrality of its questions to the overall understanding of human behavior and social experience. The readings in this book can there-



fore be seen as part of that broader project that is demonstrating the contribution of communication research to the increasingly important contemporary debates about culture and technology in society.

Those claims made, however, it should quickly become clear that the historical perspective advanced by this book raises a number of important new questions and cautions. For instance, if one is to take communication forms and media experience as central to the development of human experience, just how fundamental are they? To what extent does this argument flirt with a form of technological determinism that our more recent studies in both communication research and the philosophy of technology strongly caution us against?

Or, as another example, if we are to adopt a deeper chronological sense of communication history and push the matter back into the origins of human civilization, how much farther back must we go? We have customarily thought of the "evolution" of communication as a progression through a trilogy, from oral through print to electronic cultures. Yet much contemporary anthropological research suggests the possibility of a strong, pre-oral kinesic capacity. It may well be that systems of gesture, posture, movements, and signs antedate formal patterns of speech and language. Could it be that our classical Greek heritage and the long-standing influence of rhetoric in Western academic consciousness have overprivileged the oral tradition in the evolution of mind and culture? If so, the dimensions of a pre-oral culture will have to be mapped and added to the usual trilogy, making it at least a quartet.

However, the methodological problems therein are formidable. It has been difficult enough to describe the characteristics of oral cultures, because history is typically interpretation organized around documentary records. Periods of human experience before written documents or other tangible artifacts slide off into a vague, highly speculative prehistory. How do we develop a sophisticated capacity for inferring and knowing with any certainty the nature of the communication experience in such oral and pre-oral mists?

Meanwhile, what about the transitional periods? The trilogy or quartet models imagine a clear-cut distinction between one communication culture or tradition and another. Yet, the more we study the problem of change, the more we are struck by John Donne's problem, of finding the line between day and night. Just how long was Western scribal culture? Just how oral was it; or to consider it the other way around, how much of what we consider print culture did it anticipate, if not determine? Such questions are not trivial in our own age when we are still in the quite early days of what we think is an electronic culture.

How, too, to compensate for the Western-centric character of our interpretation of communication experience? We know just enough about Eastern languages and media experiences to begin to feel uneasy about a chronology that is dominated by European and North American recitations. At the same time, we have barely scratched the surface of the many

other great, Southern Hemisphere civilizations whose histories of speech and writing alone would probably add much rich and perhaps even confounding material to this task.

What, too, of the problem of progress? A print culture is typically seen as preferable to an oral or scribal tradition. But is it? Against what criteria? What is lost in the shift? Then, what are we to make of the contemporary changes? We swing wildly between messianic and demonic views about the nature and impact of modern communications technology. How are we to think carefully about what is better or worse in a given array of communication capacities? Indeed, how are we to account for the influence of the particular constellation of communication forms at the moment in even asking the question?

It is not as if the readings selected by Crowley and Heyer answer such questions, or that they should be expected to do so. But the perspective on communication history offered here is rich and compelling. It will make it considerably easier to teach ever more sophisticated histories of the media and communications technologies, giving them a much more sober and learned framework. It should also help energize a whole new generation of related scholarship within communication studies and even history itself.

# PREFACE

Since this book tells a story, the historical changes that have resulted from the development of new communications, it might be appropriate to begin with the story of this book.

The idea for *Communication in History* emerged from teaching experiences each of us had, Crowley at McGill University and Heyer at Simon Fraser. We were involved in organizing history of media, as well as communication theory, courses. There was a wealth of interesting material to draw from, old and new—the field of communications history has now become one of the most thoroughly researched aspects of the general study of technology and society. Yet no suitable textbook, covering the range of the subject as we saw it, existed. We thought of writing one. No easy task! But, more importantly, we felt that doing such a book might inadvertently lead us to the kind of conceptual and stylistic biases that make so many introductory texts unduly limited in their approach. Besides, we had been telling each other for several years that the best introduction to a subject such as the history of communication is a careful selection of readings containing a variety of perspectives. In the spring of 1989, we finally said, “Let’s do it.” The success of the first edition, and its limitations, eventually led to this enlarged and, we hope, improved second edition.

What follows is a series of studies of aspects of the field known variously as the history of communication, communications history, or the history of media. Although most at home in the discipline of communication, it is inherently interdisciplinary. Our contributors evidence this. They include archaeologists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and literary critics, as well as communications researchers like us. All are concerned with the nature, development, and human consequences of particular media or forms of communication. Several of the contributors reference each other’s work or pick up the discussion of the previous chapters. As a result, we think you will find considerable unity within and among the eight parts of this book.

The general introduction that follows explains the field of communications history a bit further, as well as the aims of our book. We also include introductions to each part, or section, of the text in order to provide a background to the individual essays, and especially to explain the key concepts and transitions, which we think will help readers gain a fuller appreciation of them. This strategy for organizing the readings should allow you to approach the essays either as given, or as reflects your personal interest. At the end of the volume we have included a short list of suggestions for further reading.

Finally, we wish to mention a few of the many individuals, at McGill and Simon Fraser and elsewhere, who provided encouragement, and often

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# GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Today, more than in any previous era, changes in communication and its technologies occur rapidly. These changes are visible in a fraction of a generation. Even the youngest readers of this book can probably remember life before word processors, the compact disc, home VCRs, and the wholesale application of computers to everyday life. Those a bit older might recall the introduction of color TV and stereo. Previous to this, during the post-World War II period, when the editors of this reader were growing up, television itself became a major force. It led to the decline of national programming on radio, and changed leisure-time activity.

In addition to the immediate and obvious consequences of these technological shifts, there have been a series of longer-term effects that permeate our lives in sometimes subtle ways. To better grasp this situation we need a wide-angle lens, one that lets us look at technological change and social developments in a comparative way. This book represents such a wide-angle lens: the history of communication media, or communications history as we often refer to it.

It is our belief that an examination of the essays to follow will provide readers with convincing evidence that the development of communication media in history has been an important—and too often undervalued—factor in giving shape to human societies and to the products and processes of the human mind. The essays explore ways in which communication media have been consequential both in maintaining social order and as powerful agents of change. And, as a number of contributors will point out, the lessons of the past are not without applicability to the present.

A common focus in almost all of our selections is concern for what we call a “media revolution”: the introduction and social consequences of a new form of information technology. We use the term “revolution” here not to suggest that the changes under discussion occurred overnight but that they were relatively rapid when compared to the movement of previous history. The time frame takes us from prehistoric markings fifty thousand years old to the microelectronics of today. The essays are diverse but chronologically and conceptually related. They illustrate both similarities and differences in the process of technological change and social response.

Readers will also discover a series of recurring thematic questions: Why does a new communication medium, such as alphabetic writing, printing, or the computer, come into being? How does it impact on the medium (or media) that preceded it, for example, by enabling users to *bypass* previous limitations in communication? What aspects of the new medium influence other technologies, particularly when its cost drops and/or availability increases? Finally, how have social institutions and cultural perceptions been affected by these changes, and to what degree does this situation speak to the significant, pivotal role in the history of communication technology?