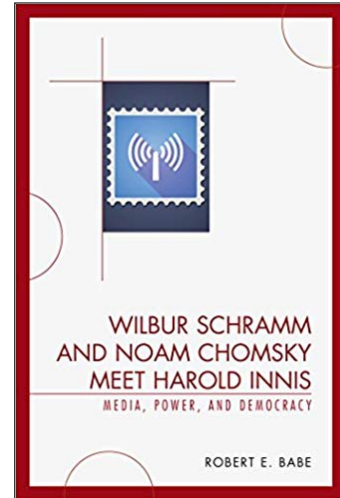


Robert E. Babe, **Wilbur Schramm and Noam Chomsky Meet Harold Innis: Media, Power, and Democracy**, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015, 300 pp., \$49.99 (paperback).

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Outside of his homeland, the Canadian communication scholar Robert Babe is not well known, even though his published research over the past 30 years on the political economy of telecommunication and media industries is crucial to an understanding of Canada's national system in the global context. Unfortunately, this *blind spot* has meant that the intellectual, cultural, and policy borders separating Canada and the United States, and that in effect impact all three NAFTA partners, including Mexico, contribute to an unhealthy scholarly insularity. Consequently, Babe's research is not an intrinsic part of a seamless, integrated academic program across North America, with the result that his insights about the rich vein of Canadian communication scholarship have been obscured from the academic enterprise.



This oversight by the dominant forces of communication scholarship emanating from the U.S. deserves criticism in order to pry open the available academic tool kit and thereby internationalize the concepts upon which communication research can be advanced. Certainly, **Wilbur Schramm and Noam Chomsky Meet Harold Innis: Media, Power, and Democracy** offers a reminder of the differentiated contributions made by three scholars whose locations are central to national and global communication research. That the book exclusively addresses three heteronormative men is a sign of former times, and one that should not be uncritically repeated as the history of communication scholarship continues to be written.

The book's title suggests that the exploration begins with the *paterfamilias* of U.S. communication studies Wilbur Schramm, moves to the anarcho-socialist Noam Chomsky, and concludes with the Canadian *paterfamilias* Harold Innis. Interestingly, the title of the book runs almost backward against the book's contents. Perhaps this is a publishing ploy, a Canadian nod of recognition to Schramm within the U.S. communication community and thus a book-selling strategy. If so, it is something of an indictment of the subtle dominance of the U.S. within a deferring Canadian cultural tendency.

Nevertheless, the book begins and ends with Innis, as does Canadian communication scholarship as anyone who has met or read a critical Canadian communication scholar such as Jody Berland (2009) will attest. Babe critiques Schramm with a rebuttal of his careerist pragmatism, before moving to Chomsky's early life as a linguist and who, like Innis, moved from the boundaries of society as a child in a morally religious family to centrally engaged communication scholarship.

Students of media history should know Innis because of his contribution to critical scholarship within the national Canadian experience, and as such he can serve as a model for research activism that refuses the myopic closure of academic life. In fact, his career was that of an outspoken skeptical independent. As Babe notes,

The task of the honest scholar (as opposed to the sycophantic "expert") according to Innis, is to sift through the biases, distortions and platitudes of mainstream scholarship to expose mainline doctrines and analyses for what they really are—tools to enhance elite power and to exploit. (p. 6)

And in his uncompromising approach, Innis's research persistently looked for truth, most often as a way of identifying how countervailing power could be used against bias.

Originating with developmental economics, Innis moved into media and communication, with a focus on what Babe describes as "a broader political economic approach" (p. 89). His early economic research on staples theory confirmed how extractive industries served the interests of the powerful, creating dependencies and national biases.

Babe offers considerable detail about the trajectory that drew Innis from the staple hypothesis to his medium theory for communication, as a way of exploring how the "Bias of Communication" (his most famous essay) embodied a somewhat deterministic tendency to "help organize the societies or civilization in different but patterned ways" (p. 35).

This perspective gives due weight to the way "monopolies of knowledge" were constructed, by denying alternative prospects for development. It was this concept combined with a consistent criticism and/or application of "present mindedness" and time and space that make, in Babe's view, the case for Innis as an overlooked contributor to communication generally.

By present mindedness, Innis meant the inability to think things through, to operate exclusively as if the pressures of contemporary demands forced one to act, provoked by communication. Present mindedness overwhelmed reflective and critical thinking in a context where time was privileged as the vehicle for addressing current issues in what became the rush to war, domination, and imperialism. Space, on the other hand, saw institutions push time away and draw on reflection.

Importantly for Babe and for the "holistic or ecological" (p. 67) paradigm that Innis embodied and that Babe manifests in his analysis, Schramm's contribution is explained from within his early development as a short-story writer, a baseball player, and an American who rarely questioned belief in the U.S. state and its expanding imperial democratic-liberalism instantiated in a scientific view of progress. Within this ideology spatial power might be served even when contingent. Data was scientized and valued above criticism.

As the foundational figure in American media studies, Schramm provides an "antithetical mode" for media studies when compared to Innis. Indeed, Schramm had few criticisms of corporate power,

government malfeasance, public relations, and propaganda—a telling list given welcome developments in contemporary communication studies influenced by critical theory, cultural studies, and media studies. For researchers conscious of the need to avoid American exceptionalism, Babe offers a welcome tonic.

Criticizing Schramm's *The Story of Human Communication: Cave Painting to Microchip* (1988), Babe notes that Schramm "evinced no irony in equating advertising/PR with freedom and authentic democracy" (p. 120).

Schramm then opined, "It is well to ask some questions about the social effects of the persuaders." However, rather than critically exploring "social effects" regarding citizenship, democracy, autocracy, plutocracy, indoctrination, freedom and control, power structure, social justice, environmental health, manufactured consent, or necessary illusions, Schramm chose to focus on

- heightened prosperity of business and the industrial system;
- free television programming and reduction in prices for newspapers due to the advertising "subsidy;" and
- emphasis in media on "popular culture" rather than "high culture." (p. 120)

Babe's antipathy to Schramm heightens the need for an improved contest between the pragmatics of the limited effects theory that Schramm promoted and critical, qualitative, humanities-oriented communication. This continues to be an issue, as U.S. research struggles with Schramm's tradition in privileging science and math. As media commentator Ken Auletta recently pointed out in *The New Yorker*, uncritical acceptance of positivism continues in the U.S.: "Math Men's adoration of data—coupled with their truculence and an arrogant conviction that their "science" is nearly flawless. . . . The power of Math Men is awesome" (n.p., 2018).

While Schramm did not meet the measure of imperiousness suggested by Auletta, Babe's dismissal of Schramm suggests that from the Canadian vantage point, the traditional U.S. approach to communication research has much to answer for.

Babe uses Noam Chomsky as a preferred foil with which to highlight Schramm's role as a founder of the U.S.'s "The Standard (Manichean) History," and by implication, the tendency of that old order to engage in communication research that amounts to deception. (This is one point that Babe could have usefully elaborated.) Yet in a wonderful appendix to chapter 7, Babe offers a "Note on the Early History of Communication Study in America" (pp. 99–104), identifying how a narrow perspective borrowed from scientific methods negatively influenced the development of communication research, "From Hypodermic Needle to Limited Effects."

Chomsky and Innis are conjoined as partners in the critical tradition. Chomsky is a welcome addition, given the importance of his tangential contribution to communication studies through linguistics and more importantly his work on the media's role in the manufacture of consent. Innis's focus on bias is

reiterated as an “outsider,” a position Chomsky shares in contrast with Schramm’s enthusiasm for insider compromise with government, propaganda, and military interests.

For Babe, the foundation for the analysis is that Innis and Chomsky stand as civic-minded beacons in their pursuit of truth, which is what this intriguing and engaging book is all about.

Finally, in a series of extraordinary questions late in the book (pp. 206–208), Babe shows how an Innis-inflected approach to critical research about communication and media in the networked context challenges the deception and narrowness of specializations typical of the dominant Manichean approach by addressing the common good, truth, propaganda, justice, and freedom. He also shows that an appreciation of Innis raises concerns about the way education and corporate interests converge, as Myles Ruggles (2005) indicated, while social media presents new ways of thinking about monopolies of knowledge. The many benefits to be drawn from reading this book are crucial to a broadening engagement with critical communication and media scholarship.

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