

# V

## Bias...

Sally Wyatt

Paschal Preston

Edward Comor

Sung Woon Cho

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and James A. Dewar

Robert E. Babe

Vincent Mosco

Anders Henten



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## Bias...

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Bias may seem an unusual title for a section. But it should not surprise those familiar with the work of Harold Adams Innis, the Canadian political economist, economic historian and communication scholar. Almost a quarter century ago, William Melody and his colleagues at Simon Fraser University in Canada organised a conference and edited a book on the legacy of Innis (Melody et al. 1981). The intersection of geography, history, economics and political science where Innis' work is situated, according to Hall (1998: 506), has proved conducive to fruitful work by Melody as well as by many of his colleagues, as is evident from the contributions to this section.

Innis' concept of bias refers to an emphasis on one aspect of something, to the neglect of another. Space-biased media, for instance, tend to neglect the dimension of time. The contributors to this section, whether they explicitly draw on Innis or not, refer to aspects that are shielded from view by conscious design or by theories and frameworks that are biased. Paschal Preston, Edward Comor and Cho, Sung Woon see Innis' and Melody's work as having tremendous potential for compensating for the impairments (Lindblom 1990) that affect inquiry.

*Sally Wyatt's* contribution is about theories and conceptions that shield as much as they illuminate. Hers is a story of teaching, of ideas being challenged, of impairments being reduced and of knowledge being passed on. There is also a parallel narrative about the impaired efforts of social scientists and others to grasp the social transformations that we are living through. These ideas are explored in greater detail not only by the other authors in this section, but also in other sections of this book.

*Paschal Preston* sees Innis' later, explicitly communication-focused, work as a starting point for analysis of information society issues, but calls for painstaking empirical work that addresses contemporary forms of technology, information and communication. He might have used Innis' (1923; 1930/1962) own research on the fur trade and railway (a relatively neglected part of the Innis legacy that is examined by Cho) as illustrative of his observations. In his call for concrete

analysis, Preston foreshadows the argument with which Anders Henten ends this section. Preston shares with Henten, and with Melody, the view that there is no fundamental distinction between developing and industrialised countries. Preston describes the current literature on information societies as a reincarnation of the communication and development theses of the 1950s (Lerner 1958). The understanding of all countries as being in the process of development, rather than reaching a state of development is one that is also found in Melody's (1981b: 11) work.

Preston and *Edward Comor* both explore the paradox of information: more information everywhere but less knowledge; more channels for communication, but less interaction. Preston does not explore the causes of this paradox, but implies that something akin to an 'iron triangle' of forces has given rise to a plethora of analytically unsupported writing about the emerging trends of information economies. Comor touches on the processes through which information is made into knowledge. Behind his observations on the importance of learning what information to pay attention to and what information to ignore, is the concept of attention as a scarce commodity, perhaps the one truly scarce commodity. In his early writing on children's television, Melody (1973a) addressed the production or aggregation of attention into audiences by the media.

Comor, Mosco and Preston, along with Babe, share a sense of pessimism that also pervaded Innis' later writings, perhaps most eloquently expressed in the reference to wisdom and insight appearing in the twilight of civilisation: 'Minerva's owl begins its flight only in the gathering dusk' (Innis 1951: 3, citing Hegel). Preston sees the need for ideas that will help to forge the 'good society'; Comor sees a possibility of reducing the accumulation of monopolies of knowledge that hold back the resolution of long-term problems; and *Vincent Mosco* looks to a new convergence of labour and consumer interests to change the world. Babe, echoing Innis' (1951) concerns about industrial society, wishes to see the extrication of humankind from the price system that he argues is threatening the survival of the human (and other) species. It is interesting to juxtapose these analyses and prescriptions with those offered by Melody. In his case, it may be argued that pessimism is understated, if present at all, and that the remedies are less sweeping. As Preston points out, Melody drank not only from the well of Innis but also from that of John R. Commons. The sweep of his analysis comes from north of the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, but the pragmatic reform orientation has its roots in the American Midwest.

Cho, Ang and Dewar offer an explication of some of the key Innisian ideas. *Ang*, *Peng Hwa* and *James Dewar* shed light on some of the policy issues that are likely to

arise from the ongoing developments centred on the Internet. They do so by looking back in time at the invention and social adoption of the printing press, a technology that occupied the attention of Innis as well as McLuhan (1962). Their contribution draws from a workshop that included not only Eisenstein (1980; 2000), the pre-eminent scholar of the printing press in the West, but also Kang (2000), an expert on early Asian printing technologies and associated social changes. *Cho, Sung Woon* explores the relations between the economy and communication, drawing from the early economic work of Innis as well that of Du Boff (1980; 1983; 1984), an economic historian whose work was drawn on by Melody (1985c). Mosco also sees the relation between the economy and communication as being of great importance. He notes that both Melody and Dallas Smythe, another Canadian who made a significant impact in Washington as Chief Economist at the Federal Communications Commission at the time that television broadcasting was being introduced, contributed greatly to advancing our understanding of the inter-relationships of economy and communication.

Smythe and Melody were great friends and colleagues. Their commonalities extended beyond their service as Chief Economists of the FCC (separated by several decades) and as Chairs of the Department of Communication at Simon Fraser University (in succession). They also shared an interest in the economics of audiences. The differences in their treatment of this one concept shed important light on the nature of Melody's approach. In his book on *Children's Television*, Melody (1973a) asks the question 'what is bought and sold in the television industry?' The answer is audiences. Melody takes this significant finding and translates it into policy proposals for the reform of children's television (see also, Melody and Ehrlich 1974). Several years later, Smythe (1977; 1981) explicated the audience as the commodity that is bought and sold in communication industries. In his case, the audience commodity was the core concept of late 20<sup>th</sup> century capitalism, and audiences were seen as creating surplus value in the Marxian sense. Melody opts for a concrete analysis and the implications for reform, while Smythe moves to abstraction and grand theory. This friendly divergence is found also among the contributors to this section and to this book as a whole.

*Robert Babe*, who began his academic career steeped in institutional economics like Smythe and Melody, now writes from an ecological perspective. His first thesis is that the emerging information economy is intertwined with the price system and shares its space bias, as discussed by Innis (1956). Interpreting the concept of bias to refer both to what is emphasised and paid attention to, and what is hidden and ignored, Babe goes on to develop five arguments to show that the information economy, intertwined as it is with the price system, is destructive

to the environment. His theses are directed to the information economy as such, but they are also a general critique of the price system. Would the threat to the environment be less, or more, or no different, if the cluster of activities described as the information economy had not arisen?

Focusing on the development domain, *Anders Henten* poses a series of questions about apparent inconsistencies in Melody's writings. How can Melody be critical of the activities of transnational corporations while, at the same time, actively promoting sector reforms in developing countries that increase the spread of communication infrastructures? Does this not increase the vulnerability of these countries to penetration by transnational corporations? He answers these questions by showing that Melody is, in fact, consistent. Henten argues that Melody's conclusions flow from concrete analysis, not grand theory; and that as a result, he can support sector reform without being inconsistent.

Henten notes that Melody's positions do not fit neatly into conventional right-left classifications. For instance, Melody has not been a defender of government ownership, especially when such ownership appears to stifle innovation and the efficient supply of services. But he has been an equally vehement critic of the view that markets are the solution to everything. Markets are very useful instruments, but they are only as good as their institutional design. In his writing and speaking on regulation, he has taken issue with others such as Littlechild (1984: para 4.11) who have proposed a highly constrained role for regulation: that of 'holding the fort' until competition arrives.

Henten's observation of apparent contradictions within the body of work of a single author and the 'reconciliation' of those contradictions, has an interesting parallel with that of a question asked by Albert Hirschman, best known as the author of *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (Hirschman 1970), that Lindblom (1988) answers at length in the form of a compilation of articles. The question was how Lindblom had come from incremental policy making to the apparently radical argument of *Politics and Markets* (Lindblom 1977) (incidentally, a book that Melody used in his teaching).

Lindblom's (1988: 11) answer appears apposite to the question at hand.

Do I believe that the political and social world is in such good shape that it needs only incremental improvement? Indeed not. ... Do we therefore need drastic change? Indeed we do. Given, however, the existing political structures of the ostensible democracies, there is little

hope of getting it except through long glacial sequences of incremental changes. ... Wars and catastrophes aside, it looks as though anyone who wants drastic change will do best to promote rapid incremental change cumulating into drastic change. His prospects are poor, but ordinarily worse if he takes any other route. Incremental policy making is weak, often inefficacious, inadequate to the problem at hand; and the control over it often falls into the wrong hands. It is also usually the best that can be done. Such a view of incrementalism, not the buoyant view of it that commentators often attribute to me, is not at all difficult to reconcile with the critical writing on democracy and market.

Melody has learned from, and contributed to, many traditions of social theory, but his core allegiance has always been to the institutional economics of Veblen (1899/1994), Commons (1959) and Mitchell (1913/1970). It is intriguing that it is Henten, a European political scientist several degrees removed from the intellectual milieu of the American variant of institutionalism, who chooses to develop his analysis around these foundational aspects of Melody's intellectual project.

When assessing and analysing specific situations and developments, it is far from sufficient – if not erroneous – to deduce outcomes from general theory. The specificities of different situations must be taken into account. General theories should be applied, but they should be used as tools to understand specific situations (Henten, in this section).

This is perhaps the key insight that can be taken from this section. The world is complex, and it appears to be increasing in complexity. Instead of an absolute test of truth and theories of everything, we can get by with the criterion of 'practical adequacy' (Sayer 1992: 65-71) and less than grand theory.

We need theory to help us see what is shielded by various biases, but beyond theory we need concrete analyses to help us see at least some of the biases of our own. It is only through this balance between abstraction and empirical inquiry, between theory and praxis, that we successfully can navigate the knife's edge between technological determinism, where all is preordained, and post-modern ruminations that allow everything to be criticised, but nothing to be done.