



## Communication Support: Between Media and Power

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes the view of Harold Innis in relation to the resources of written communication across time and scrutinizes the relationship between power, society and channels through media. It focuses on the up-to-dateness of the work, “The bias of communication”, only translated in Brazil in 2011. It reflects on the transience of all the resources of writing. It questions the commitment of men from each era to dominant resources in their times. It crosses the thoughts of Innis with those of Flusser. Question: what will disappear: paper or writing? What will communication look like without paper?

**Keywords:** Harold Innis; print; paper; imaginary; technology, Vilém Flusser; power

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## **THE ROLE OF WRITING**

Writing has changed the world. Nothing more obvious. Useless to retell the history of its emergence and development. Needless to take stock of the changes produced. To say that to divide cultures into literate and illiterate has become virtually unquestioned will suffice. The very notion of history the invention of writing has as its inaugural milestone. The history of writing, however, is a true story, an epic, a gigantic novel peppered with tragedies, victories, sufferings, wars and snares. It is a history of beliefs, ideologies and power. Rarely has an invention simultaneously generated both inclusion and exclusion of humans. A whole section of humanity was pushed out of history. Man took large steps through the millennia: he dominated fire, discovered agriculture, domesticated animals, invented the wheel, gave birth to writing.

None of these discoveries or inventions was free of charge. Each extraordinary technology creates one world and buries others. Writing produced the concept of civilization to an ostracism of primitivism, savagery or barbarism, beings and cultures limited to orality. Within the long night of time, as was said in times gone by, an era when writers allowed themselves to have romantic raptures, men faced enormous challenges: how to store and transmit information at a distance? Writing has responded to these two questions: it has served as artificial memory and means of communication. But it could not obviously fulfill these functions alone. Codes and supports were required for this. Writing is an autonomous and dependent universe. It needs support, but rises above it, establishing mythologies.

Man without writing appears today as the inhabitant of a remote past, a kind of minute dinosaur grappling with extreme natural forces and colossal dangers. A leaf blown by violent winds. This man from afar now inhabits the imaginary of movie juvenile films in the best style of "Afternoon Sessions". How could this man survive in such harsh environments? How could he invent and transmit culture before the culture of writing with its power storage and transmission of information? Again it is possible and even plausible not to narrate all stages of this great struggle waged by man in building this culture of humanity. It is certainly enough to suggest that in the production of the humanizing of man writing played a decisive role.

On the other hand, man without writing is not so distant. He may be the native who remains in delimited geographic areas, like the Amazon, or excluded by illiteracy from the so-called "complex societies". It was the men of writing, enlightened spirits and Illuminists, who

invented this dichotomy, primitive societies and complex societies, societies in writing and societies with writing. A strange classifying universe in that the writing was and remains one of the most powerful weapons against prejudice, but also in its favor. If writing served to combat ignorance and superstition, the rotating machine-gun of the Illuminists, it also served to produce a new prejudice: the prejudice against the illiterate. But it is not this story that will be discussed.

What separates man from nature? Many may be the possibilities or hypotheses to answer this question. One is this: writing is definitely the artifice that separated man from other animals (and from other men as well?). As is said, writing is a watershed, an ocean separating worlds, the open sea that, for example, has for a long time made Europe an ethnocentric universe, convinced of its superiority over others, especially the illiterates of the Americas and Africa. If all of this is questionable, questioned, broad, and generic, nonetheless, it enables us to take a step ahead: writing is a technology. Does all technology have its time? Writing is a technology that depends on other technologies and artifacts. Writing, to play its role, needs other resources. In the virtual era can one still talk like this? Is writing experiencing a non-support? Or is it nearing its end as an artificial memory and means of communication? Is it the end of paper?

## **THE POINT OF VIEW OF HAROLD INNIS**

In everyday imagery - common sense - of the men of the XXI century, especially in the imaginary of lovers of a literary culture, books and writing are an inseparable pair. They have a lot of past. Will they have any future? It is known that to ask questions may be more important than answering. It is also known that repeated unanswered questions may be even more important. An intellectual is one that provokes debate. Questioning the future of this pair arouses the wrath of the most passionate and automatically triggers nostalgia for an allegedly obsolete paradise. It is common to hear doctors wistfully praising the texture of paper, the smell, the book format. Every day, new technologies mercilessly bury seemingly more rational arguments of these desperate defenders of an object, of a culture, of an era, of a way of being, of a view of the world.

The Canadian Harold Innis was not a man of Communication. He did not belong to this academic universe, which would become a particular field of study. He already entered this game, so to speak, in deferment. Like other researchers, he followed the long history of media writing and communication.

He realized that communication was power. Impossible not to reach this conclusion. It is more relevant to say that he understood that this power comes largely from the control of communication media. If writing is a control technology, power technology, to control it has always been decisive to control the media, maybe even more so than the codes. He could teach reading and writing provided the controlling role of paper remained with few, those in power. Innis took the relationship of power, culture and communication technologies to the extreme. He was accused of technological determinism. He can be defended as a theorist of a technological determination. There are technologies that change the world, and men, though not all of men use them. It is pointless to waste time retrieving Martin Heidegger to argue that technology is not neutral. Innis goes right to the point: the influence of communication on Western society.

At each era, a support, a tool and a modality: a) clay, stylus and cuneiform writing from the start of civilization in Mesopotamia, b) papyrus, the brush and the hieroglyphic and hieratic [writings] of the Greco-Roman period, to which are added the reed pen and the alphabet [at the time] the fall of the empire of the West, c) the parchment and pen in the tenth century (or Dark Age), d) that coexist with the paper, which becomes more important with the invention of printing, e) the paper and brush from China and [on the other hand] paper and pen in Europe before the Renaissance or the invention of printing, f) the printing press and paper based upon crafting methods up to the early nineteenth century, or [in the period] from the Reformation to the French Revolution; g) paper produced by machines and the use of [sources of] [non-human] energy alongside the printing press, from the beginning of the XIX Century, to the paper made of wood, in the second half [of that] century, h) celluloid in the expansion of film making, i) and finally the radio in the second quarter of the nineteenth century "(Innis, 2011, p. 69-70).

Besides television, the internet would also be present. The long quote above describes almost all the time of writing, its support and instrument of execution: clay and stylus, brush and papyrus, parchment and pen, paper and brush, paper and press, etc.. Each support requires an instrument for the attainment of writing. But all the media has shown itself to be transient. The role was imposed. There were, however, different raw materials. Long has been the search for the best source for the production of paper. If writing conditions a little of everything, including, or especially, art and politics, the media have a decisive role in this conditioning. Innis argues: "The rapid expansion of Greek lyric poetry in the seventh century has been attributed to the spread of cheap papyrus" (2011, p.74). This cheap papyrus would have had the result of opening the Egyptian ports to the Greeks in 670 B.C.

In other words, the history of communication has largely been the history of writing, which has been the history of the media, with a privileged place for paper. On the other hand, one can say that the history of writing has been the narrative of the rise and fall of its supports, all ephemeral, passing, transient, overcome by other more effective, cheaper and ever more available to a greater number of users. The history of communication has been the history of writing as a means of memorizing and transmitting information in media historically dated and surpassed by others of lower cost and greater availability – a permanent search for a more flexible, satiated, cheap, clean and inexhaustible media. Innis did not live to see the emergence and expansion of the ideal, virtual non-support: inexhaustible as the wind, non-polluting, safe in the production of its operating equipment, the computers, as well as of minimum price.

Paper seemed to be invincible. The paper-press-book-newspapers-magazines chain became a legend. It produced lightness, speed, a great capacity for memory and the transmission of information. It appeared eternal. Radio and television struck the first two blows to the power of writing. Nevertheless, they have never been able to do without writing. The information was conveyed at a distance without paper, but fed on paper and could not, nor intended to be universalized. It was up to the majority to take on the role of receiver. And behold, in the late twentieth century, when all utopias and revolutions seemed settled, a new unprecedented technological leap occurs: a new support for writing; potentially the end of a need for paper. At first, writing continues. Until when? A virtual reality is the new support. The computer is the new instrument of registration, a distant successor to a reed stylus. A new imagination takes shape. It is needless to make an inventory of the advantages and disadvantages of both paper and virtual reality. The trend is at a phase of consolidation. Time is its ally.

## **THE INTUITIONS OF FLUSSER**

What do the controls look like when no longer supported? What happens to writing when you can live without it? Harold Innis highlights an aspect rarely discussed: paper also faced suspicions and bias. Nothing more traditional. Every technological revolution goes through certain stages: impossible, unnecessary, for few, incomplete, inefficient are some of the terms that label that which, coming to stay, shakes a seemingly apparent and immutable reality. According to Innis: “With the overcoming of prejudice against paper (for being a product of Arabs and Jews) and with the dissemination of trade, the use of parchment increased as a medium for deeds and the classics”

(2011, p. 91). Gradually, the economic law would impose itself devastating a universe of uses, practices, relations, power and gains.

For centuries everything revolved around the pursuit and attainment of cheaper media for writing, considering that the image was stigmatized for religious reasons. When paper was established as the ideal support everything started rotating around obtaining cheaper raw materials for their production. Today, making a leap from this minimum base, it can be said that: the question of support has been surpassed. Paper now belongs to the history or the prehistory of communication, supplanted by an inconceivable non-support, the perfect support. There remains the production of the equipment for this virtual media. Innis believed that every revolutionary technological invention generates an impact of lush exuberant consequences:

"Therefore, I have tried to demonstrate that the advent of sudden extensions of communication produces cultural disturbances. The use of clay favored the domination of the temples, valuing the clergy and religion. Libraries were built in Babylon and Nineveh to strengthen the power of the monarchy. Papyrus favored the development of the political organization of Egypt (...) improving manuscripts, and greater dissemination of knowledge enabled the survival of the Jews through the emphasis on the Scriptures and on books" (Innis, 2011, p. 100-101).

Power, yet again, was always linked to the control of the codes, of instruments for registration and to the support. Which is the possible cultural disturbance when the instrument for registration becomes universal and the support disappears or becomes immaterial and accessible to everyone? End of power? The beginning of a new democracy? The dawn of a libertarian world?

"With access to paper, the Muslims in Baghdad and later in Spain and Sicily provided a medium for the transmission of Greek science to the Western world. The Greek science and paper, with the encouragement of writing in vernacular language, led the cinema through temporal power and spiritual power and destroyed the Holy Roman Empire. The decline of Constantinople meant a stimulus to literature and Greek philosophy as well as the decline of Islam meant stimulus to science. The press renewed the emphasis on books and contributed to the development of the Reformation. In turn, new methods of communication have weakened the worship of books and opened the way to new ideologies" (Innis, 2011, p. 101).

The book, it is worth repeating, is a very recent consolidated invention in terms of timescale. It is the product of a technology and of an era. Do computers and Internet represent the toll of

bells for technology? Are books disappearing? Or just paper? If for some, books and paper form an inseparable pair, others already accept delivering their rings not to lose their fingers; may paper die if this be necessary for books to remain in another medium. However, the situation is already more serious. It may be necessary to deliver one's fingers to save one's hand: may books die (the writing) if it is to save the stories, the narratives, the telling. A return to images? A return to orality? The end of the necessity of writing as an artificial memory and as an instrument of the transmission of information at a distance and in time?

In 1987, Flusser published a book in German with an unsettling question as the subtitle: "Is there a future for writing?" After 25 years, the answer seems to dance in front of everyone, since all kinds and quantity of information can be stored in sound and image; just as it is possible to transmit everything through audiovisual media. Are we heading towards a society of illiterates? Flusser opened his work in an overwhelming manner:

"There seems to be almost or absolutely no future for writing, in the sense of a sequence of letters and other graphic signs. Nowadays, there are codes that convey information better than graphic signs. What has been written so far can best be conveyed by cassette tapes, records, films, video tapes, video discs (CD-ROM) or floppy disks, and much of what could not be written can be encoded in these new codes. The information encoded in these patterns are more easily produced, transported, received and filed than in written texts (Flusser, 2010, p. 17).

Poor Flusser, all media cited by him have been surpassed by other more efficient or different - virtual cloud - which is characterized as the ideal medium for not being one. Without going into the intentions of Flusser - to defend the salvation of writing or announce its end - one realizes just how much his analysis looks increasingly like the appearance of a prophecy. What is the future of humanity without writing? What would be the impact of the disappearance or marginalization of writing in democratic societies? Those who are more cautious claim that so far the internet has only increased the use of writing. Until when? What kind of writing - a condensed form of writing? Is it perhaps like the parchment at another time, the time cited by Innis when of the spread of paper used for craft, artistic, anachronistic printing, the remnants of a surpassed era? The problem, however, is no longer paper, but writing.

## THE TENDENCY OF WRITING

Everything has its time. Time tends to make itself seemingly extemporal for whatever it marks. Writing is a deep incision into modern imagination. Flusser made a dense and passionate presentation of the value of this writing associated to this profound thought:

"Writing is not just a reflexive gesture that turns toward the outside, it is also a (political) expressive gesture, which turns outwards. Those who write not only imprint something on their inner selves, but also express it to meet the other. This contradictory impression confers tension to writing. That's why writing has become the code that supports and conveys the western culture, and that has given such an explosive form to culture," (2010. P. 21).

And if these words by Flusser are just an impression? And if from this impressionism only words correctly aligned emanate with a certain logic, the logic of a possible or probable argument, although indemonstrable? And if the power of writing, capable of making Western society so explosive came simply from this capacity, unsurpassed until then, serving as an artificial memory and an agile means of communication for the transmission of information? Why would image and orality be cognitively inferior to writing? Each technology creates its own imaginary, its mythology, its necessity and its defenders. The main characteristic of the most revolutionary technologies is to impress itself on the social imaginary as impossible to bypass. Writing founded a system of social hierarchy with scales, categories, prizes, benefits, distinctions and functions. How can the permanence of this hierarchy be imagined without its grounding?

The most profound view of communication is the written word. However, already in the time of Harold Innis, it was possible to observe: "Education, reading, entertainment, politics, religion and philosophy have been profoundly affected by the radio and the television" (Innis, 2011, p. 299). Radio and television are now part of the old technologies, both profoundly affected by informatics and by the virtual world. At the time of the audio-book, reading gained a new dimension. Is it the return to storytelling? Is it the case of story writers? Is it really possible to think of a world without writing at a medium term? Flusser, a quarter of a century ago, wrote in terms of Science fiction:

"if we must relinquish writing, then there will not be any type of paper in our environment except that for packaging. Driven by nostalgia, cellulose returns to its cells; the forests will be greener, and the reeds will not sway anymore in the morning wind along the Nile, but in all the

rivers of the earth. The sheer horror does not involve us, bookworms and termites, who devour paper, in this green utopia” (Flusser, 2010, p. 107).

Everything has already happened. Flusser's anticipations have been left behind as a banal or accurate prophecy:

"Surely then, there will be other and better memories than artificial libraries. Everything that has been maintained in libraries will be transposed to these new memories. The concept of the Encyclopedia Britannica will require less than a cubic centimeter, and any information contained therein will be available at a quick touch of a button. There will be appliances in which any segment of the desired information will appear in the form of sound images” (2010, p. 107-108).

From the meeting between Harold Innis and Vilém Flusser there is a highlight that emerges: Jules Verne is one of the greatest thinkers of our times. His role is that of a symbol – to anticipate the impossible which will become possible. Paper, the support of a civilization, is now a dead package. Is writing a printed ghost in the groove of imaginations? The arguments in favor of the superiority, necessity and immortality of writing begin, at times, to weaken. An article like this one cannot have great expectations. Courage to repeat the question suffices, which will be called heated by some, obsolete by others, and also as impertinent: has writing fulfilled its time? Ultimately, will we be literate once again, albeit on a superior condition?

On the edge of a river, looking at swaying reeds, men will think of stories that will be spread by the clouds.

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