

This paper traces transatlantic and cross-border intersections at the foundation of Canadian media studies with which the idea of a “Toronto School” is so widely associated. Marshall McLuhan’s experiences studying in Cambridge, UK, and teaching in Wisconsin, St. Louis, and the border city of Windsor, had distinct implications for the directions his communications research would take once he moved to Toronto in 1946. His key collaborator in Toronto, the American anthropologist Edmund Carpenter, had arrived from Pennsylvania deeply invested in interdisciplinary anthropology that advocated humanistic, poetic, and artistic approaches to documenting cultures through multiple media (photography, film, sound, as well as the literary and visual arts) and that opposed positivist ideals of value-free scientific anthropological research. Through a grant application in 1953 to the Ford Foundation’s interdisciplinary research and study program in Behavioral Sciences, they obtained \$44,250 for a two-year research project to study the “Changing Patterns of Language and Behavior and the New Media of Communication.” The timing of this grant is significant given the scope of contemporaneous studies of media and communication underway in the US and Europe: functionalist and critical cultural studies of mass communications, theories of cybernetics, intercultural communication, as well as psychological studies of the effects of media on human perception. American studies in communications engineering, they argued, did “not transfer events, commodities, or services but a patterned relationship between these.” The proposal thus opened with some of Harold Innis’s important insights regarding the American Revolution which he interpreted as a culture clash between two networks of communication: the fur trades controlled from France and England, and the newly developed social networks of the colonies. Canada maintained those fur trade networks for a century, long after the United States had abandoned them. This fact of Canada’s history has created “a bi-focal habit of vision” making natural to the outlook of Canadians “the historical and the scientific, the humanist and the technological simultaneously.” McLuhan and Carpenter believed this bi-focal habit of vision could be used to create a richer perspective on the continent as a whole. Given the aim of their research to compare the effects of different media on our senses as well as on forms of education and patterns of social organization and behaviour, a second major influence was the Sapir-Whorf theory. As with Innis, Edward Sapir in particular combined multiple standpoints: a European psychoanalytic emphasis on socially-situated personality with North American attitudes towards cultural and social structures. Moreover, Sapir “fused the European concern with philology with [the] North American concern with dynamic patterns in language.” In the same way that Benjamin L. Whorf’s metalinguistic techniques examined languages to understand collective strategies of adapting to changing notions of time and space, anthropological techniques for investigating cultural aspects of new media would complement psychological studies of personality. McLuhan and Carpenter thus believed an interdisciplinary and experimental framework, drawing on key