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Ghislain Thibault

Celestial Posters: Skywriting and the Folk Theory of Media Influence

Universität Bremen | University of Bremen
ZeMKI, Zentrum für Medien-, Kommunikations- und Informationsforschung
Linzer Str. 4, 28359 Bremen, Germany, E-mail: zemki@uni-bremen.de
www.uni-bremen.de/zemki/ | www.uni-bremen.de/en/zemki/

Ghislain Thibault (ghislain.thibault@umontreal.ca)

Ghislain Thibault is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at the Université de Montréal. In 2019, he was ZeMKI Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Bremen. He received his PhD in 2010 from the Université de Montréal before pursuing postdoctoral work at Harvard University. Appointed as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University in 2011, he later joined the Université de Montréal in 2015. His current research project explores the notion of aerial communication from a media history perspective. His recent work in the cultural and material history of media and on the history of philosophy of technology has appeared in journals such as *Canadian Literature* and the *Canadian Journal of Communication*, *Configurations* and *VIEW*.

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Celestial Posters: Skywriting and the Folk Theory of Media Influence

1 Introduction

On January 1st 2016, a few months before the United States presidential elections, spectators at an annual parade in Pasenada, CA suddenly had their attention pulled to the sky. They watched as hundred-foot-tall letters were drawn there with white puffs of smoke to form a series of short sentences, including: “America is great,” “Trump is disgusting,” and “Anybody but Trump.” Readable for only a few minutes, the sentences soon vanished into thin air. The commissioner of the communication stunt, millionaire Stan Pate (a supporter of Marc Rubio), had chosen a technique known in the skywriting industry as “digital skywriting” to intervene in the Republican primary, making use of the sky as a space of mass communication. He later told CNN’s Gregory Krieg, “Skywriting is a huge billboard and it grabs people’s attention. There were probably a million people in the street.”

Pate’s assumption about the power of the sky’s attraction has been tightly associated to discourses on skywriting over the past century. In 1923, only a few months after its introduction, a *Scientific American* piece called skywriting a compelling advertising method, capable of “attracting the attention of thousands” with the “possibility of such advertising being used on a large scale” (Klemin, 1923: 323). And indeed, it has been used on a large scale. The palette of mass media that a corporation, an individual, or a political campaign could employ to advertise its brand or make a statement included skywriting as a viable option for a long time. It has been widely used by corporations – Lucky Strike and Pepsi-Cola most prominently – in the skies of countless urban centers worldwide and throughout the twentieth century (although particularly in the United States). A writer for *The New York Times Magazine* noted in 1938 how skywritten ads were routine for New Yorkers, being visible on most days (Wharton, 1938). She wondered, with irony, whether New Yorkers were more “susceptible” to advertisement there than anywhere else, given its frequency.

A *Canadian Aviation* magazine article called skywriting “an established media” in the late 1930s, yet it has been largely ignored by scholars, historians, and cultural critics. A handful of recent works on the topic acknowledge this neglect and have begun to engage with its history. James Taylor, for instance, addresses the social reception of skywriting as a way of exploring the relationship between technology and consumer culture in Britain (2016: 752). At the intersection of the history of science and media theory, Graham Burnett (2015) documented how skywriting could and should be linked to the history of military aviation while providing a “counter-history” of skywriting by decentering the central, heroic figures of received history (although one might argue in return that there was no dominant narrative on the history of skywriting to begin with).

Most striking, however, is the absence of skywriting in media studies and media history. Raymond Williams once brushed it aside as a “frill” (2000: 420), while historiographies of mass media and textbooks from communication studies are silent on skywriting, and even more generally on the field of aerial advertising that gained prominence in the interwar period: think of aerial banners towed by aircraft, the dropping of commercial leaflets and coupons from planes, blimp advertising, etcetera. The literature on the history of mass media tends to focus on what Peters and Simonson (2004: 1) call the “Big Five” (newspapers,

magazines, film, radio and television), neglecting a plethora of other minor forms of media.[1] Some of these media were unsuccessful and uncanny; others, like skywriting, were mainstream and quite well established.

The steady decline of interest for mass media as a research object in the field of communication studies since the end of Second World War is partly to blame, and in the past two decades we have seen a renewed interest in "new histories" of mass communication research (Pooley, 2008). Such a revision of the history of mass media is necessary, if only to truly grasp the exposure to media, the "media repertoire" (Hasebrink and Popp, 2006) past social groups experienced. It is probably fair to say that in addition to radio and print media, a New Yorker in the 1930s would also mention car cards, megaphones, flyers, postcards, neon signs, newsreel films, and skywriting as media forms he or she routinely encountered. The insistence on radio and print in media history scholarship gives the impression of a past media culture that is relatively homogenous, when in fact daily life was already saturated by various competing media forms.

The intention of this article is not simply to revisit the history of skywriting because it has been neglected – it is to show that media history is a fertile site for exploring the history of communication studies as a research field as well. Examining the historical case study of skywriting serves as a site from which to follow the formulation, circulation, and persistence of what is introduced in this article as the "folk theory of media influence." Media studies scholars have wrestled for a long time with the circulation and perpetuation of the argument that mass media has direct effects upon individual and collective beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. This idea, perspective, or presumption about the power media has over its audiences is one of the most persistent theoretical tropes in communication science. The origins of the assumptions about the direct effects of media exposition – regularly associated in the Anglo-Saxon scholarship with the mythical "hypodermic needle theory" and "magic bullet theory"– are generally ascribed to a nebula of early models of influence found in brand advertising techniques from the nineteenth century, in social psychology theories (from Gustave Le Bon's crowd theory to the stimulus-response models of behaviorism), or in military propaganda discourses from the early twentieth century. However, when historians of communication studies zero in on specific historical cases of individuals, research teams, publications or schools of thoughts, they find that academics studying the influence of media were immensely more nuanced about the effects of media, even prior to the institutionalization of communication as an academic discipline in the 1940s. Stefanie Averbeck-Lietz (2001), for instance, has shown how early academics during the Weimar Republic in Germany were already overcoming the stimulus-response perspectives in their study of the effects of media (in particular newspapers). Communication studies pioneer Paul Lazarsfeld also expressed doubts regarding the assumption of all-powerful opinion control by the media already in the 1940s (Nietzel, 2016: 65). Thus, the stimulus-response approaches have been growingly perceived as "myths" (Schoenbach, 2001; Martinson, 2006) and "straw man" theories (Chaffee and Hochheimer, 1985; Lubken, 2008) more so than as established theories.

Still, the stimulus-response perspectives on media have remained surprisingly thick-skinned, despite that communication studies scholars have critiqued, nuanced, and debunked them for decades (Gauntlett, 2000, 2005; Couldry, Livingstone, and Markham, 2007: 26). These perspectives have reproduced and been reactivated in various professional, political, and popular discourses. It justifies even today many of the strategies in brand advertising (still

[1] Carolyn Marvin (1988) was among the first generation of media historians who began expanding the notion of "media" to include other technologies (in her case, the electric light) as part of media history. The field of media archaeology – as it has been taken up since the 2010s (Huhtamo and Parikka, 2011) – has also been productively excavating neglected media forms.

a robust part of the business models of television programming and social media), political communication and public health campaigns.

This article examines the “folk theory” of media influence to describe the ways social groups interpret, describe, and perform the relationship between society and media, both in its symbolic and material manifestations. It argues that this set of discourses regarding media influence and media effects is more than “social meanings” or “popular understandings”; rather they are a “theory,” a way of making sense of *how* media works. The “folk” in “folk theory” is not understood here as originating and circulating merely in the vernacular imaginary of social groups deemed “popular” (workers, citizens, or laymen). On the contrary, as argued below, the circulation and perpetuation of the theory of direct media effects is mostly found in the body of discourses and practices of communication professionals: marketing agents, reporters, public relation experts, engineers, and inventors.[2] Hence, the use of “folk theory” underlines the fact that this is a widespread belief about an abstract phenomenon which is a part of daily life, shared across several communities of both experts and non-experts. In the sections that follow, the case of skywriting is analyzed not only to expand the history of mass media to include some of its forgotten forms, but also as a way of addressing where, when and how the folk theory of media influence manifested.

2 Skywriting: A Background Story

As Burnett (2015) has shown, the origins of skywriting are contested. This should not be surprising: contrary to the neat, minutely dated Whig-oriented historiographies, technological innovations are most often the result of a collective, imprecise, and messy web of forces. Reading through decades of press clippings while contemplating the “invention” of skywriting, it is almost amusing to note the tendency writers had to express their desire for a singular, heroic narrative. Most of these clippings reproduce the story about how the first public demonstrations of skywriting were done in England sometime during the summer of 1922, under the patronage of John Savage, a former Royal Air Force pilot turned entrepreneur. Regarding whether Savage imagined skywriting after, during, or before the war, even contemporary observers do not agree; and whether the invention of skywriting should be attributed to the Allied military forces (with their experiments using coded aerial puffs and smoke screens), or even earlier to the American amateur pilot Art Smith (who performed some kind of skywriting stunt for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition World Fair in December 1915 [Burnett, 2015: 28]) that too, is up for debate.

Echoing the way billboards burgeoned next to highways as a by-product of the car (Gudis, 2004: 47), skywriting was the outcome of an innovation in transportation technology: the airplane. The exhaust from planes produce condensation, which is visible as trails more or less dense, depending on meteorological conditions. The invention Savage describes in his patents includes several adjustments he made to an airplane so that it could accommodate a drum carrying a liquid compound of paraffin oil that could be dropped next to the plane’s exhaust. The result was a dense, lasting, smoke-like vapor more visible in the airplane’s wake than exhaust alone, enabling pilots to turn fuel residue into a communication medium. Using precise maneuvers and a lever to drop the compound, the pilot could “sketch” kilometer-long letters by releasing thousands of cubic feet of smoke. Savage’s patents aimed

[2] Closest to this argument and the period of this article is Peter Simonson’s work on the history of the concept of “mass communication” (2010). Also focused on the interwar period, when the concept of mass communication rose to become a key term, Simonson’s work has shown how one industry player – David Sarnoff, president of the Radio Corporation of America – played what he calls a “rhetoric role” (2010: 9) in the production and circulation of the ideologies and meanings of mass communication.

at increasing the density and duration of the artificial smoke-like vapor to enhance the contrast between figure and ground – smoke against skyscape – to make meaning appear.

The 1920 US patent Savage filed to popularize his "invention" was submitted in hopes of turning a profit; the principal functions he identifies for skywriting were "advertising" and "public amusement" (Savage, US1426413). Savage mentions the potential for "scientific demonstration" (the study of aerodynamics, for instance, by making the path of flight visible), but what he really has in mind is writing brand names in the air. An early advertisement for skywriting, published in the popular magazine *The Aeroplane* in June 1922, introduced the new medium by comparing it to print media: "A skywriting demonstration of your trade mark or business slogan rivets the attention of everyone within an area of over 100 square miles and the cost *per square mile* is in most cases less than newspaper 'space' per *square inch*" (n.d., 1922: 13, emphasis in original). Hence sky*writing* was portrayed by its promoters as a new mass media, and the *New York Times* even mentioned the possibility of skywriting short news dispatches, something it called "smoke casting" ("Airman" 1922).

Because of its proximity to advertising, many in the professional aviation community (in the UK, at least) looked down on skywriting. In the same issue of *The Aeroplane* where the first advertisement for skywriting was published, Savage was harshly mocked:

> As the business grows, as it certainly will when general trade improves and enterprising pills and salts and oil merchants cloud the air with their obscene advertisements, Major Savage will probably grow a beard, even if he does not in other respects follow Mr. Bevan's lead and flee the country, for probably the hired gunmen of the Brighter London Society will be seeking his blood. ("The Smoke Fiend," 1922: 454).

Many other publications approached skywriting with a degree of caution. A piece in *Flight Magazine* from 1922 reads, "We frankly confess that if the new invention represented nothing more than an advertising 'stunt' we should not feel inclined to devote space to it in our columns, but if one studies it in greater detail it will be discovered that a number of interesting possibilities suggest themselves" ("Writing in the Sky", 1922: 475). The wary approach used when skywriting was discussed in the British technical press translates a sentiment that advertising was not a noble outcome for scientific and technological progress.

Facing an audience that was more than hesitant, Savage began circulating the argument that skywriting was a means to keep both planes and pilots in training, as a standing reserve for coming military conflicts.[3] The connection between war and communication was not only fully visible in the case of skywriting – it became advisable. Clients who used skywriting were cast in the patriotic role of using the "only section of the advertising profession which is of direct military value to the Nation" (Skywriting Corporation of America, n.d.). This rhetoric seemed to work for a short while, since the interwar period was a time when the future of commercial aviation was being forged. Nations were trying to find peacetime applications for their airplane fleets and crews of military pilots. Aerial advertising, whether in the form of skywriting, banner-towing, or leaflet-dropping, was one of many possible avenues for the future of commercial aviation, along with passenger transportation, airmail, aerial photography, aerial surveying, and pesticide spraying. Regional responses to these new applications differed greatly in terms of geography, political context, and national cultures. In Canada, for instance, the vast distances between many communities made aerial surveys and airmail a priority. In France and the UK, the use of airplanes over large urban areas for advertising purposes was resisted strongly by their populations, since the sight of

[3] This rhetoric was used systematically with skywriting. In Britain, the Air Ministry abandoned the idea to ban skywriting from an Advertisement Regulation Bill in 1925 on that basis (Select committee on skywriting, 1932: 2, 6).

plane was a cruel reminder of wartime bombings. In Germany, the rise of the mythical Zeppelins fostered a version of commercial aviation that favored passenger transportation.

As it turned out, skywriting became prominent in the United States. Just as the author of the review in *The Aeroplane* had hoped, Savage did flee the UK and crossed the Atlantic in the fall of 1922 (without a beard), looking for a more positive reception to his advertising medium in the New World. Operating in collaboration with the Sky Writing Corporation of America, a newly founded corporation that held the rights to his patents, Savage signed with a major client, the American Tobacco Company. Skywritten ads for the cigarette brand Lucky Strike were legion across the country from 1924 to 1934, a period when the company contracted thousands of skywriting events for $1,000(USD) a piece, spending millions over a decade. Arguably, smoke was the ideal medium to use for selling “smokes.” Another prominent new client of skywriters in the early 1940s was soft drink manufacturer Pepsi-Cola. In the postwar era, many other American clients booked skywriting services, making it an important feature of mass mediated culture in urban areas; a number, like Prestone, Ford, and Chrysler, were in the car industry.

Skywriting was, in fact, quite mainstream in twentieth-century American media ecology and it became an important part of the outdoor advertising industry. The space it colonized and commodified – the sky – had been sought by humans as a communication medium for decades, even centuries, if we think of the long history of pyrotechnics, smoke signals, optical towers, and any other technical attempts to reach upward. The unobstructed view and high visibility of the sky makes it an ideal technical milieu for long distance communication, but it has also been a rich object for the human imagination and a source of poetic contemplation, scientific endeavors and symbolic interpretations across cultures and epochs. From natural philosophy to astronomy, astrology and meteorology, the sky and the heavens have inspired, fascinated, scared and puzzled. [4]

When modern advertising in the late 19th century tapped into the sky as a site for public communication, it appropriated both its technical and symbolic dimensions, and the race to go up began. Increasingly tall buildings were crowned with billboards, known as “sky-signs,” visible to pedestrians from the streets when they looked upward. Stationary balloons were also used, indicating the names and locations of various merchants beneath them. Dirigibles, with their giant fabric sides, were turned into mobile billboards; a Mellin’s Food advertisement was spotted in the sky on one above the Crystal Palace in London as early as 1903. Projections onto clouds were also attempted using electric searchlights (see Marvin, 1988, and Huhtamo, 2009). Skywriting was one manifestation of what we could call the “mediatization” (Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Hepp 2013) of the sky, which was accelerating then: that is, the process through which the perception and experience of a shared reality was increasingly embedded through the social and technical processes of various media.

As with billboards and other outdoor advertisements, there was a great deal of social resistance to skywriting. Many observers felt that advertisements were ultimately a violation of a sacrosanct space, one best left to daydreamers. A writer for the *New York Times* called skywriting “celestial vandalism” in 1923; another in 1927 was outraged by “commercializing the sky” and “the misappropriation of a public property by private individuals for private profit.” (“Commercializing the Sky,” 1927). Comments about the vulgarity and insolence of violating the sky with visual ads in the popular press reflected a common view that the sky, unlike other earthly spaces, should be protected as commons.

Even if “skywriting is a rare art now,” as a writer for *The Atlantic* stated in 2014 (Lafrance 2014), it is still regularly exploited in political and advertising campaigns, and is known in

[4] On the cultural history of the sky and astronomy, see, for instance, Krupp, E. C. (1999). On the relationship between literature and science on the cosmos, see Aït-Touati, F. (2011).

the world of marketing as “stunt ambient media” (Shankar and Horton, 1999). Indeed, along with large corporations, the skywriting industry has garnered the interest of wealthy individuals, activists, and political teams who require short-term slogans or statements in the sky, from a Willkie supporter who wrote “No Third Term” (for Roosevelt) during the 1940 US election campaign, to the “Wash Hands” reminder skywritten over Sydney harbor in Australia during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020. As a form of non-inscriptive graffiti, skywriting transgresses the quietude of the sky for a moment without leaving a trace.

3 Dumb Mobs and Craned Necks: Imagining the Audience of Skywriting

The central feature of the folk theory of mass media effect is a representation of the audience as a faceless aggregate of passive, naïve, and influenceable individuals. The imagined audiences of skywriting have embodied this view with remarkable persistence over time. Promoters of skywriting readily repeated the idea that the event was invariably so spectacular that crowds gathered spontaneously and voluntarily to watch, in complete awe, the name of a brand being written with smoke before their eyes. Such sustained attention from the “dumb mobs”[5] was depicted in the print media, where audiences were described with “craned,” “bent,” and “cramped” necks, eyes looking up, eager to read what was being written. A biopolitical apparatus, skywriting was deemed to stupefy bodies and enter minds. An advertising pamphlet for Lucky Strike in 1923 speaks of the “advertising sensation” of the year, one that “stops traffic, arrests all motion on the street, ties up the wheel of commerce and keeps thousands gazing at the sky.” (“The Advertising Sensation of 1923,” 1923)

The efficiency of skywriting’s communication was indeed entirely built on the curiosity, fascination, and positive reception of flight technology – the *medium* of skywriting. It was as if the popularity of the television had been founded on a constant renewal of awe for the television box itself, with its antenna, buttons, and cathode ray tubes. To be fair, however, the technology of the airplane *did* attract attention in the first half of the twentieth century and beyond. Reactivating the fascination for the balloons before it (a “balloonmania” had swept continental Europe in the late eighteenth century), the airplane was what Derek McCormark calls a “technology of captivation” (2018: 60). It was still a new invention when it became a defining feature of the First World War, and in the conflict’s aftermath, aerial shows and air circuses became important cultural and political sites where the airplane was celebrated (Adey, 2010a, 2010b; Holman, 2019; Rech, 2015). Skywriting was an audience favorite in aerial shows because it put military aerial maneuvers on display and was a demonstration of the pilot’s skills (Burnett, 2015). In a sense, the necks of individuals willing to see flight technology in action were, indeed, voluntarily craned. But relying on the medium alone was risky. Media historians have noted how the initial feeling of astonishment we show for technology tends to rapidly drift into the realm of the habitual and familiar (Gunning, 2003). Who notices telephone wires and poles anymore? The medium usually gives way to content when it comes to our attention, a point made by Marshall McLuhan (1973) in his reappraisal within media studies of the gestalt figure/ground theory.

The medium of the airplane was fundamental to skywriting. *How* words were being written, how fast letters disappeared, what typos a pilot would make: it was the articulation of letters, the spectacle of calligraphy, in short, the *process of writing,* that attracted attention.[6] The actual content of skywriting was repetitive, predictable, almost meaningless.

[5] This is a provocative inversion of social media’s “smart mobs,” Rheingold (2003).

[6] For some time, at least. In 1936, the writer of a satirical column in *Aviation Magazine* wrote of a fictive situation where a man witnessed the coupling of aerial banners with a “siren screaming

Emphasis was on the writer and skywriters have been praised in the press as experts, described with every possible pun, wordplay, metaphor, and poetic formulation on writing and writers alike: the skilled "aerial penman" and "sky scribblers" were able to perform "the art of heavenly chirography," the "handwriting on the sky," the "celestial posters" with a "pencil of smoke on the walls of heaven." Still, when this modern scrivener was performing according to plan, skywriting was nothing more than the vacuous repetition of the names of a handful of corporations produced by a ventriloquist writing backwards with the help of a card he carried in the cockpit. It is no wonder that from thousands of skywriting performances, those that really caught public attention were ones where the medium had failed. Stories abounded in the popular press of awkward misspellings, missing letters, unreadable sentences, and the most difficult letters to draw. A few mythical stories were told countless times in the press: the two rebel skywriters who played tic-tac-toe, the skywriter who forgot to add the "H" in "air show," or the pilot who wrote 1 + 4 = 6 in the sky above New York. All the rest of the successful and uneventful occurrences of skywriting bore the mark of a ponderous *déjà vu*.

Paradoxically, the abundance of metaphors about writing that have been used to describe it, skywriting "remediates" (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) orality more than it does writing. Orality, as media scholars have shown, is a medium that is dynamic and requires the physical presence of both speaker and hearer for meaning to be articulated (Meyrowitz, 1994; Ong, 1982). Walter Ong noted that the act of speech is an "event" (1982: 32) which is unfolding in the same time-space continuum for its participants. The ephemerality of skywriting is characteristic of orality (this was also true of the optical telegraph); in contrast, writing is context-free and the materialization of the communicative processes into stable and fixed forms is often rendered invisible. By crossing past and new media forms and by making fully visible the assemblage of social actors, institutions, practices, technical objets, and structures of symbolic meanings necessary for communication actions to be performed, skywriting highlights particularly well the processual nature of all mediated communication (Hepp 2013).

4 Changing Economies of Attention: The Entrepreneur as Theorist

Relying on the spectacular nature of skywriting and the malleable masses watching below, skywriting promoters believed exposition (acoustic or visual) to a brand would lead to more sales. This was, of course, the logic behind brand advertising as practiced in the nineteenth century. However, the field of marketing when skywriting emerged was changing. Raymond Williams noted the shift from brand names to more elaborate methods of appealing to consumers:

> Slowly, after the war, advertising turned from the simple proclamation and reiteration, with simple associations, of the earlier respectable trade, and prepared to develop, for all kinds of product, the old methods of the quack and the new methods of psychological warfare. (2000: 418)

Skywriting firms, arriving on the scene with a new medium right at the beginning of this transition, knew that they were competing for revenues with other media. Commercial radio was only nascent in the early 1920s, but magazines, newspapers, and billboards were well established, and they were moving past simple brand advertising.

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raucously" and said, "Who would have thought that I'd live to see the day when an airplane would need a horn to attract attention?" (Osborne, 1936: 12).

In a document that aimed to sell its service, the Skywriting Corporation of America recognized the limitation of its medium, acknowledging that it could not, indeed, tell a story or narrative about particular products. Skywriter companies were stuck with brand advertising, not by choice, but because the medium itself, Twitter-like, was only capable of producing a few letters at a time. This is what Andreas Hepp calls the "moulding force" of media: material specificities "exert a certain 'pressure' on the way we communicate" (2012: 14). Here both sky and smoke – the material specificities of skywriting – limited the scope of one's expression. A promotional document written for clients reads: "We cannot explain the 'reason' why the product is to be advertised. The press, billboards, and other media hold monopoly on this and they, with the advertising man's art, have always made a 100% job of it." Still, "skywriting … indelibly imprint[s] a name or a slogan on the mind, to create an immediate sales impulse, and to saturate public opinion for the brand skywritten." (Skywriting Corporation of America, n.d.).

To make this last argument valid in the eyes of potential clients, the company often referred to an experiment that was conducted by the American Tobacco Company before signing the Lucky Strike deal. In 1922 the cigarette maker rerouted its entire advertisement budget from magazines and billboards to skywriting operations in Philadelphia. According to the Skywriting Corporation, sales for Lucky Strike went up by 60 percent as a result, securing them a decade-long contract. To explain why this approach was so efficient in selling a brand, the entrepreneurs of skywriting resorted to an argument about the environment that skywriting depends on, and ultimately benefits from. Skywriting could not be performed on rainy days. The environmental and meteorological conditions were (and still are) in complete command of the efficiency of the communication between the pilot and the audience on the ground. Any disturbance in the background – wind, clouds, rain, darkness, haze – in turn threatens the legibility of the ephemeral words. If this was arguably a deterrent for many clients (after all, who wanted a communication model with such variable reliability?), the promoters of skywriting resorted to a folk theory of psychology to put it to their advantage. Skywriting became a sort of feedback machine, powered only when the "mood" of the population was ready. "Work[ing] on fine days … functions as an automatic selector of the audience.… *Everyone knows* that the sale of goods which are sold over the counter varies with the weather. A fine day, and every store in town does fine business" (Skywriting Corporation of America, n.d., emphasis by author). "Everyone knows," indeed, is the rhetoric core of folk theorization.

As a business model, skywriting faced a challenge similar to that faced by radio: those who constituted its audiences were largely unknown. Who was listening in, and where, is the great unknown of broadcasting. Skywriting companies were also in a haze when it came to producing data regarding the exposition to a corporation's campaign in the sky. But rather than approaching it sociologically, like print media and radio, skywriting viewers were thought of geographically, as a population. Even if radio and print media were often portrayed leveling down the individuals listening in or reading as a faceless and unified mass, there was still some degree of audience stratification. Women's magazines targeted women; amateur radio magazines targeted young men, et cetera. Raymond Williams was right when he said that radio was not so much a "mass" media, but a social communication aimed at individuals in the domestic space (2000: 16). The concepts of "genres" and "programs" in both radio and television equally reveals how the imagined audiences of mass broadcasting were type-casted, as opposed to the "population" of skywriting. A sales pitch from the 1960s (figure 1) even visually reproduced the impact of a skywritten message, using a war-like representation of the radius of bombing impacts: "everywhere will be exposed to this forceful reminder."

Exposition to the message was done over large areas that were chosen indiscriminate of who was on the earth below. As a business model, then, entire populations were "sold" as

audiences of skywriting campaigns, regardless of their actual witnessing and understanding of, or caring about, what was written. The logic of skywriters went even further: they argued that social contagion spread the skywritten message, completing its saturation within the population, reaching those even who had not witnessed it. According to this logic, the inside of the house was not even a refuge for aerial advertising.

6 Conclusion

The aim of this article was to revisit the history of skywriting in order to excavate some of the institutions and discourses embodying the folk theory of media influence in the interwar period. If it is difficult to attribute the theory of the direct effects of media to any one scholar or group of scholars from the period, the case of skywriting documents at least one of the scenes where it did circulate. As such, it contributes both to media history by exploring a mainstream media form that has been neglected, and to the intellectual history of communication studies as a discipline by highlighting the sites where the articulation of one of its most robust theories has circulated. Perhaps even more than radio or print, the study of skywriting reveals the complex articulations of the folk theory of media influence. The article shows how the promoters of skywriting services and the pilots themselves were crucial social actors in the process of perpetuating the folk theory of media influence, mostly by taking for granted a view of mass communication. Policymakers, citizens, and even marketing professionals in many cases expressed doubts about this view, suggesting more nuanced models of communication that emphasized the agency, intelligence, and resistance of audiences.

Frozen in time, the rhetoric about the power of skywriting's persuasion tells us much about the persistence of the folk theory of media influence. It particularly highlights the imperative of communication as a means of capturing attention, one of the unique features of capitalist modernity (Crary 1999: 13). The new technical means of perception that burgeoned in the nineteenth century elevated visual perception as an epistemic virtue for modern society, and in turn this virtue was co-opted by the industry. Recognizing the complete saturation of earthly living environments, the promoters of skywriting turned the natural landscape of the sky into a "mediascape" (Appadurai 1990).

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