# Fast Drying, Long Lasting: A Recent Evolution of the Technological Function of Wheat Paste Posters

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Abstract

While there has been a lot of work applying the Toronto School of Communication to new and developing media, there is less said about older media which is being adapted to current contexts. This paper explores the recent explosion of wheat paste posters in Washington, D.C. through the lens of the scholars Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and Umberto Eco. My paper addresses the issue of this return to the wheat paste poster as a form of political messaging through Innis' lens of time- and space-oriented media and combines this with influences from McLuhan and the argument for guerilla media that Eco proposes. Together, alongside a historical view of the wheat paste posters of Gran Fury, these authors provide a strong foundation from which to constellate the current usage of wheat paste posters in comparison to the past. By closely examining this function of the medium, this project sheds new light on the often-historicized medium of the wheat paste poster in the current digital age.

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Introduction

When I walk down the streets of Washington, D.C., I now rarely go a block without seeing a pater pasted onto a mailbox or lamppost. Anecdotally, when I started looking for these posters in late 2022, they were hard to find. I would see some, like Figure 1, pasted around specific neighborhoods advertising specific movements, which would stay up, undisturbed, for months after the event had passed. Most of the information I received on political news, protests, and other forms of political involvement I found online. Especially following the pandemic, I maintained a heavy reliance on the social internet including social media, email newsletters, and the algorithmic Apple News app to stay informed.


*Figure 1. A poster for a rally in support of Appalachian Resistance in DC pasted onto a streetlamp, September 8, 2022. Photo by Chloe Irwin*

In the 20th and 21st century, technology has been evolving rapidly. From the evolution of the digital era from standard webpages to Web 2.0 to curated 'for you pages,' the change

happening in current digital technologies has been staggering. The norms of protest and gathering practices has escalated quickly in kind. What started as word of mouth and phone trees has since evolved to best practices on social media. However, with hyper-personalized algorithms becoming standard, and social media companies like X and Instagram being owned by billionaires who profit from Trump friendly policies, there has been a new resurgence of analog field work in Washington, D.C. activism. This is especially true in protest art. In Washington, D.C., it now feels almost impossible to walk a block without seeing a wheat paste poster on a construction site or lamppost. These posters range from advertising neighborhood town halls to broadly criticizing Elon Musk, and range in artistic efforts.

In a nation of increasing political divisiveness, this return to semipermanent and localized protest is a meaningful shift towards an older communication medium. While many have examined the effect of ephemeral media like an Instagram story, the return to supplementing this ephemera with a tactile piece of artwork is meaningful. From March 2025 to March 2026, I conducted a collection project of these posters in Washington, D.C. I have visited a variety of neighborhoods throughout Washington, D.C. to collect over 200 instances of political wheat paste posters. Due to the nature of the medium, I am confident that there are many posters I did not capture. Figure 2 highlights the location of all posters I analyzed. It shows a general footpath of my patterns over the past year, with some clear absence. However, I aim to analyze specific instances of these posters and the impact of their overall location and message, alongside the rise in their popularity in the area. Therefore, while my photographs prove to be an incomprehensive guide to Washington, D.C. wheat paste posters, they will provide an adequate basis to dissect the growing trend within the area. Compared to Figure 1, Figure 3 illustrates the ubiquity of wheat paste posters in 2025. Just on one streetlamp, there are three wheat paste posters highlighting

different movements with distinct calls to action: a largescale call to end fossil fuels, a critique of DOGE members with their emails attached, and a call to attend a rally for trans visibility. Together, these posters come together to highlight the range of messages wheat paste protest posters entail in the present day, despite the specificity of the category.

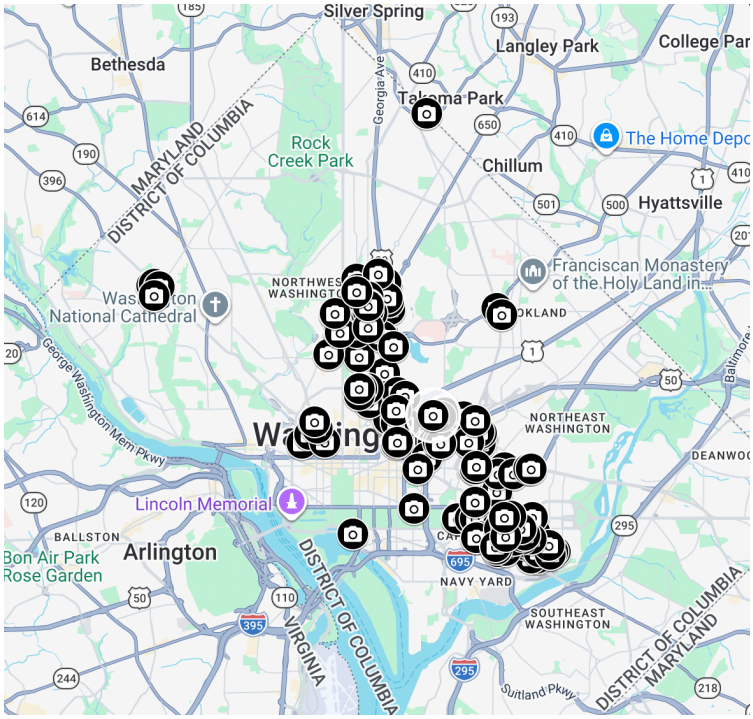


*Figure 2. A map of all wheat paste posters analyzed for this project. Map by Chloe Irwin.*


*Figure 3. A collection of wheat paste posters on the corner of 4 St SE and South Carolina Ave SE, June 4, 2025. Photo by Chloe Irwin.*

While the message of these posters is worthy of consideration, the primary consideration of this paper is of the medium of the wheat paste posters. The posters, often, are conveying similar if not identical messages to congruent posts on social media. Why, therefore, are the wheat paste posters worthy of note? More than that, why are they worth the cost of effort, printing, and dissemination throughout Washington, D.C., when the cost of effort of a social media post is infinitely lower once the original graphic of both media is created? These questions are buoyed by the continuous replacement and reinvention of the wheat paste posters, which shows their potential resilience as a localized medium of communication.

To ground this analysis, I utilize three foundational scholars of media studies. I look towards Harold Innis, Marshal McLuhan, and Umberto Eco to provide frameworks of analyzing media. I draw in scholars to continue the conversation between these foundations, bringing each

of them into the present day. These scholars provide a basis from which to analyze the medium of the wheat paste poster. Understanding the history of materiality studies is essential to understanding how the current resurgence of wheat paste posters fit into the current media landscape, specifically surrounding countercultural protest art. I choose these scholars to examine the importance of the wheat paste poster medium not just because they are pivotal in the media studies field. They each look to explain or answer the rapid change of communication media. They propose how digital media will alter our communication landscape. By looking at these scholars, and the history of wheat paste posters, it becomes clear that the wheat paste poster today is uniquely positioned to rise in popularity again. While I imagine that each of these scholars would have different ideas about the resurgence of the protest poster, I believe they come together to explain that the wheat paste poster has returned as a subversive medium to spread information in the face of rising authoritarianism.

The relevant theories of materiality and its impact on mass media were generated in the mid-20th century, guided by Innis, McLuhan, and other members of the Toronto School of Communication, a school of thought formed around how technological engagement structures culture and communication ("The Toronto School of Communication"). As Blondhein and Watson explain in *The Toronto School of Communication Theory: Interpretations, Extensions, Applications*, one of the main drivers of the Toronto School is how technology of communication shapes the process of communication. "In communications, the technology is ever present and salient because it is the substrate of the act," they write. "A *telephone* conversation, reading a *book* or watching *television* are activities that are inextricable from the technologies that support them" (Blondhein and Watson, 10). This focus on technology as a necessary part of

communication has set the foundation for a vast field of study today.[1] I apply the methods of specifically looking at wheat paste posters as a medium to explain their current influence in local organizing as a radical way to keep the viewers' attention through repeated interactions and disruption of expectations, with only brief asides on how the content of wheat paste posters might support this disruption.

I apply this theoretical grounding to a historical reference of the use of wheat paste posters to organize activists who were subverting the political mainstream. During the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Gran Fury helped the larger movement of ACT UP by utilizing wheat paste posters as protest street art to aid in organizing and spreading information about the work that ACT UP was doing at the time. Their most famous work, "Silence = Death," remains as important queer iconography today. I examine why their wheat paste were especially effective and apply this knowledge to the current day. Using my collected repository of wheat paste posters, I compare the work of Gran Fury and its material conditions to the work of a variety of organizing bodies today. With this foundation, I can then apply the above scholars to the question of the resurgence of the wheat paste poster, arguing that the medium provides a new avenue to engage with viewers in lasting ways that are more fluid than the rapid nature of the social internet.

[1] The work of Innis and McLuhan is varied enough, and often contradictory, to the point where it resists summary. James Cary puts it, "commenting on the abstruse and controversial scholarship of Harold Innis and Marshal McLuhan is a rather audacious and perhaps impertinent undertaking…despite the dangers… I think students of the history of mass communication must assume the risks of analysis" (5). Understanding the fundamentals of how McLuhan and Innis approach communication technology is critical to the discussion that follows in this text. Therefore, I will do my best to provide a deep review of key ideas that Innis and McLuhan propose, rather than attempt to provide a comprehensive review of their prolific works.

Wheat Paste Posters: A Brief History

The history of wheat paste goes beyond posters and propaganda. Historically, wheat paste and other plant-based adhesives have been used in book binding and the manufacturing of papyrus by the Egyptians, which was first documented n 77 A.D. (Prosby, et al., 2024). It has since been identified in book binding from 8th century Japan, mortar, painting and calligraphy in East Asia, and in a variety of posters and art which need adhesives for porous surfaces (Prosby, et al., 2024). The elasticity of the wheat paste, which can be made by boiling water and combining it with flour, continues to make it a popular medium used to affix posters outside on plywood, streetlamps, and other metal or wood features outside (Wollan, 2020). Therefore, the method of wheat pasting is inherently tied into the history of poster making. While printed posters date back to the Middle Ages propaganda posters with a political message became common in World War I as color printing techniques improved and become more accessible (Szurmiński, et. al, 2022). This method of propaganda remained common through World War II and expanded notable into forms of protest during the HIV/AIDS epidemic through works from Keith Haring and the art collective Gran Fury. The establishment of wheat paste as a long-standing aid in communication media illustrates how it is being repurposed into new methods of communication. Specifically, the translation of propaganda and advertising into a new subversive media is revolutionary, and opened the doors to the current utilization of wheat paste posters used in Washington, D.C.

The representation of protests through physical symbols, often posters but also frequently stickers, graffiti, and other physical symbols, act as a powerful way to expand a grassroots political movement. Jackie Jia Lou and Adam Jarworski of the City University of Hong Kong and the University of Hong Kong, respectively, discuss the importance of protest signage in the

perception of political movements through the lens of the Hong Kong Umbrella Revolution, which was a series of protests in favor of universal suffrage in Hong Kong. (Iyengar). The authors write that signage throughout the protests "highlighted the potential of linguistic and semiotic landscapes to insert new voices and alternative narratives into the fabric of urban spaces" (Lou and Jarworski 612). This signage creates a call to action, to either literally march I support or in other ways give support to the protests. (Lou and Jarworski 614-615). The medium of the political message and the message itself both carry meanings, as well as the visual and political space surrounding the text.

Gran Fury: Wheat Paste Posters During the HIV/AIDS Pandemic

An illustrative movement to explore regarding wheat paste posters and street art is the response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The art created by Gran Fury was art meant to inspire activists, and the ACT UP coalition after its founding. Gran Fury was an art collective self-identified as "a band of individuals united in anger and dedicated to exploiting the power of art to end the AIDS crisis," as Jack Lowery writes in *It Was Vulgar & It Was Beautiful: How AIDS Activists Used Art to Fight a Pandemic* (2). Gran Fury purposefully borrowed techniques from advertising and marketing to become visible by the larger public outside of the ACT UP movement, originally relying on the press to disseminate their work but later organizing purposeful displays, including guerilla wheat paste posters, as their name recognition grew (Lowery 3). Working to persuade and promote a movement, Gran Fury worked to utilize its work as a civil rhetoric propaganda meant to help give those with HIV/AIDS increased power in the political space than they were receiving (Stanley 119). Gran Fury's success in creating these performative acts lies not just in the internal crafting and content of their text, but also in its context and dissemination.

A clear example of this difference is perhaps the most famous work of the collective that would later become Gran Fury, the poster containing a pink triangle and the words "Silence = Death." While the collective that created this poster had not yet formed into the group Gran Fury, and predated ACT UP itself, their group and poster became the foundation for the art movement to come. The pink triangle was originally established based on an op-ed published by William F. Buckley in the *New York Times* (Lowery 38). He wrote that "Everyone detected with AIDS should be tatooed [sic] in the upper forearm, to protect common-needle users, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals" (Buckley). Later in the op-ed

Buckley resisted the comparison of this tattoo to a scarlet letter, but the group saw a more apt connection to the pink triangles used in concentration camps in Germany during World War II to demarcate homosexuals, creating a starker visual connotation thank what originally concerned Buckley (Buckley). The simplicity of the triangle made it both easily identifiable and easy to transpose onto other activist materials, such as protest signs for ACT UP that would be inspired by Gran Fury's art.

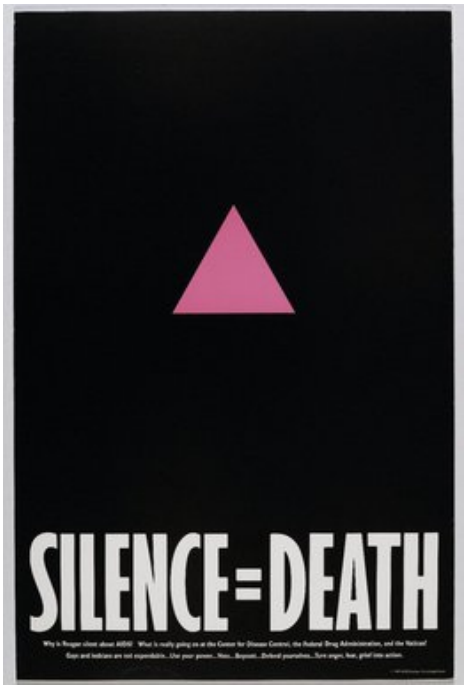


*Figure 4. The original Silence=Death poster, one of the first works of the group that later would be known as Gran Fury, 1987- Photo Courtesy of Avram Finkelstein.*

The words "Silence = Death," however, were a new accompaniment to the pink triangle. Avram Finkelstein, one of the creators of the "Silence = Death" poster and a later founding member of Gran Fury, suggested the phrase "gay silence is deafening" from a diary entry, which quickly evolved into the "Silence = Death" phrase that was used to have the opportunity to contain a multitude of meanings (Lowery, 40). As Umberto Eco writes, the meaning is different to a variety of different audiences, all with a different method of interpretation which may be

discordant with one another based on the audience's current state (10). The silence could include, according to Finkelstein, silence involved in hospitals in the lack of care and attention towards HIV/AIDS patients, the silence of Reagan and the administration, silence of those with HIV/AIDS eliminating their access to a care network due to shame, and silence of the gay community as a path to death (Lowery 40). The equal sign offers another variety of interpretations, reading as a question, a challenge, an assertation, all thanks to its meaning both mathematically and metaphorically (Sember and Gere).

The continued success of "Silence = Death" is that to a large swath of the discordant audiences that continue to interpret the "Silence = Death" posters, the message still is performative and inspires action.[2] The words of the poster provided a blueprint for breaking the silence on AIDS, because in the act of creating the poster, the collective was breaking a form of silence on the growing public health crisis. By creating and disseminating the performative statement "Silence=Death," the silence is, in part, rendered impossible through the perlocutionary act of breaking the silence, where the collective is creating a change by performing action through their speech. It also makes the illocutionary request of the viewer to speak or act. This is clear because without the action of the viewer, the act will not be successfully carried out (Austin 115). These posters engage in disruption tactics by interrupting viewers daily paths. They are on the street, and the simple design attracts an onlooker who is then brought into a mediated conversation with the poster. This is the same disruption that can be seen today. However, the disruption was in a different media landscape. Therefore, it should be

[2] To drive this point home to the most observant, the poster reads in small font at the bottom, "Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Center for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable… Use your power… Vote… Boycott… Defend yourselves… Turn anger, fear, grief, into action" ("Poster, Silence = Death").

interpreted differently. As seen by the variety of posers in Figure 5, the wheat paste poster was more ubiquitous for advertisements in New York at the time, which is why the message must also be considered as a disruption tactic to see the full impact of the poster in the political space of the time. Meanwhile, most posters that I have seen in Washington, D.C. are political posters, meaning that the medium, rather than the content, is what is the most important disruption tactic.

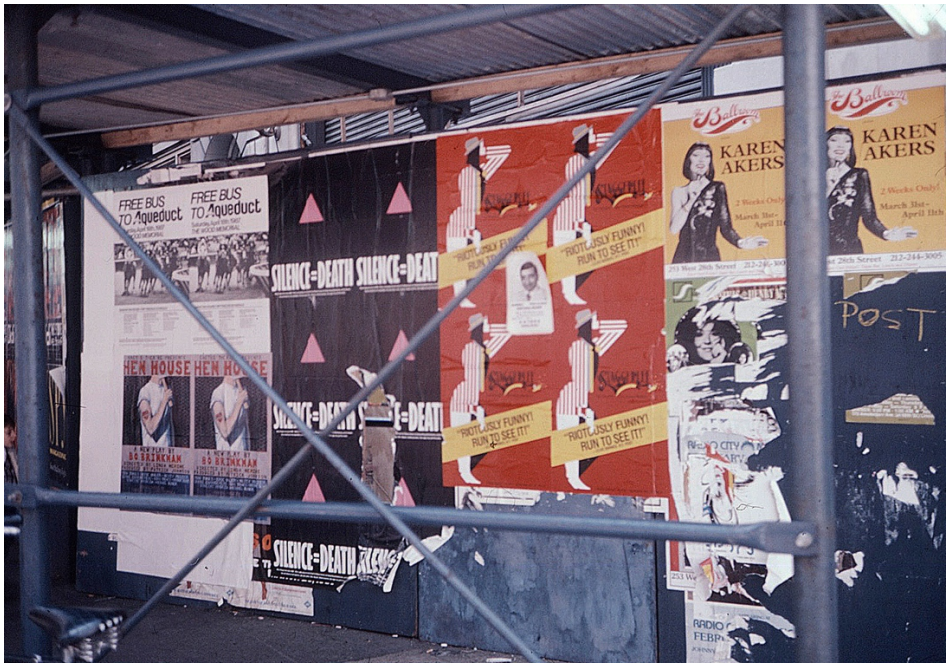


*Figure 5. "Silence = Death" posters wheat pasted alongside a variety of advertisements on a Manhattan construction site. Photo by Oliver Johnston*

The wheat paste poster during the 1980s and 1990s were, however, still arguably one of the best disruption tactic that Gran Fury was able to produce in terms of sustained attention and impact. Avram Finkelstein came up with the idea for specifically using a wheat paste poster based on a cultural usage of such posters to enact social movements in New York City. As Lowery writes, "New York City had always had a vibrant poster culture. The apex of this had been during the anti-war movement, which Finkelstein had seen, and noted. As a teenager, Finkelstein could always find out about upcoming demonstrations just by walking down Eighth

Street or down Manhattan's other thoroughfares" (35). In the 1980s, there had been an increase in use of a semilegal marketing through wheat pasted posters called "snipping," which populated advertisements around the city (Lowery 42). This cheap and widely accessible method of production in the compressed area of Manhattan allowed the "Silence = Death" posters to reach many people by targeting only a few smaller spaces and open themselves up to a huge national media market while staying within the city (Lowery 43). Alongside this, the "Silence = Death" posters created a dissonance between the traditional marketing posters that crowded these spaces and were often colorful and busy in their design. As McLuhan explains in *The Medium is the Massage,* "Anti-environments, or counter situations made by artists, provide means of direct attention and enable us to see and understand more clearly" (71). The contrast of the majority black "Silence = Death" posters with massive, simple text stood out and acted as a disruption from the other surrounding posters. In fact, Finkelstein paid for a larger poster simply to expand the negative space, which was meant to mirror the void of silence on HIV/AIDS (Lowery 40). This disruption and contrast thanks to the poster's design and surroundings is what made the "Silence = Death" so successful at being noticed and inspiring change. The medium of a wheat paste poster, at that moment in New York City, communicated an overwhelm of marketing that bombards the senses. The wheat paste posters provided from Gran Fury provided something intentionally different from the current marketing of the time.

The poster became, in the words of a member of ACT UP, like a "bat signal" for the movement (Lowery 47). It gained traction almost instantly and became a rallying cry of unification, alongside a need for a more politically oriented AIDS/HIV group than the previously established Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), whose goal was to be more informational rather than directional towards the HIV/AIDS crisis that was growing (Lowery 54). Members of

GMHC claimed that their directive was to create an informed choice surrounding HIV/AIDS for gay men. “You don’t tell people how to have sex,” they wrote. “You give people the information about how AIDS is transmitted, and you let *them* make their own informed choice” (qtd. in Shilts 325). As a frustrated Larry Kramer put it “I helped found Gay Men’s Health Crisis and watched them turn into a sad organization of sissies. I founded ACT UP and have watched them change the world” (qtd. In Lowery 54). From the beginning, ACT UP had the express goal to be political instigators rather than neutral informers, a goal which Gran Fury adopted, too. This activation was proven in their wheat paste posters and other guerilla messaging, starting with “Silence = Death.”

Soon after the ubiquity of the “Silence = Death” posters, the collective was asked to create a window display for the New Museum by curator Bill Olander. The New Museum Window display served as a direct continuation of the “Silence = Death” poster. The triangle and phrase were turned into a neon sign which hung above the window display, which showed below a variety of people who were on “trial” in a replication of the Nuremburg trials being held accountable for their crimes during the AIDS epidemic (Lowery 83). Running in between the window and the neon display an electronic text runner ran with more detailed charges for those featured (Crimp 8). The show was received well in a variety of art and museum spaces, largely thanks to a review by Douglas Crimp in the following issue of the art journal *October*. Gran Fury member Tom Kalin attributed all future success in more formal art spaces to the recognition given to the group through Crimp (Lowery 92).


*Figure 6. Let the Record Show... on display at the New Museum. Photo by Fred Scruton*

While the "Let the Record Show…" exhibit was well received, it did not function politically in the same way as the original "Silence = Death" poster. This is, in part, due to the recontextualization of "Silence = Death." Instead of being widely applicable to a large majority of the audiences, the addition of the defendants on trial puts the onus of action on the policymakers and public figures, not on the public themselves. This is helpful with the intention of not placing a responsibility to stop HIV/AIDS on those who have it (Sember and Gere). However, it stagnates any potential call to action to a passerby, or someone reading coverage of the window display. The illocutionary act is therefore weakened due to the context of the trials, because the actions that are being requested are not of the audience and instead are narrowed to include only a select group of public figures.

Alongside this, the medium through which the installation disseminated had a large impact on the impact of the work. Because the installation was a fixed piece of art in the New Museum, it could not be spread around Manhattan in the same way the "Silence = Death" posters were. The audience was limited to who walked by the window exhibit or visited it, alongside anyone who read coverage of the installation. The coverage was contained mostly to press directly within the art world, therefore making its scope small, albeit impactful for the future of Gran Fury specifically as a group. There was no large disruption of communication avenues, but rather a smaller point being established. The medium of the museum exhibit did not serve their political goals. It was fixed to one space, not broadcast widely. However, it was also temporary. It was a limited window exhibit, meaning that it only had a certain amount of time to impact people in a place where they already looked for artistic renderings. Therefore, it also did not open itself up to more radical interpretations through subverting norms, instead only encouraging interpretations that were limited by its fixed context of the museum.

As Gran Fury formed and flourished in their assistance to the ACT UP movement, they continued to primarily work on posters and more easily distributable works. One of the most well-known are the "You've Got Blood on Your Hands…" series, inditing various political and health officials for not doing enough about the epidemic. This was shown through posters, as well as bloodred painted handprints placed all over Manhattan and could easily be placed on posters and shirts during rallies (Lowery 137-140). The work of Gran Fury is best illustrated by their wheat paste posters that inspire action and can expand and appeal to a large variety of audiences.

With a formed understanding of the current wheat paste posters in Washington, D.C., and an understanding of how wheat paste posters have historically functioned as tools of protest in

the United States, the question now becomes how these posters function as material objects as informed by Innis, McLuhan, and Eco. While I have explained briefly how the wheat paste posters of Gran Fury functioned under these lenses, the material conditions of the current movement of wheat paste posters in Washington, D.C. are vastly different.

The material conditions that led to the wheat paste posters created by Gran Fury were those of suppression. Sitting President Ronald Reagan did not mention AIDS until late 1985 and extrapolate on the subject until two years later in 1987. HIV/AIDS was seen as a massive health issue at the time, but the media attention was lacking. According to the Kaiser Family Foundation, the total number of HIV/AIDS news stories across their selected major U.S. media outlets peaked in 1987 at just over 5,000 stories (Brodie et. al, 2). This was up from just over 2,000 stories in 1986, and sharply dropped in the following years, even while new U.S. AIDS cases continued to rise (Brodie et. al, 2). Meanwhile, it was news to even be shaking hands with someone diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, as Princess Diana showed, much less listen to community organizations like ACT UP. Therefore, the acts of Gran Fury had the primary goal of getting attention from larger media organizations while inspiring activists in their community.

With the growing wheat paste poster movement in Washington, D.C., this goal can be achieved through easier methods. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2023 shows that newspapers have seen a sharp decrease in revenue in the past decade, and major news networks have seen the same decline since 2020, except for Fox News (Lipka and Shearer). Meanwhile, according to a 2025 Pew Research Center study, 53% of U.S. adults say that they get their news from social media sites at least sometimes. It is easier than ever to become a news source and to disseminate information. Social media makes sharing news instantaneous and can turn small instances into national phenomena that make their way even into traditional news

sources, such as Punch the monkey. Alongside this, current President Donald Trump has revolutionized the way he breaks news through sharing it on social media platforms first, primarily the Trump-owned Truth Social. As Adam Gabbat notes in the *Guardian*, "Trump has used the platform to announce policies on everything from the economy to travel bans, making declarations that are key for Americans seeking information about his government" (2025). It has never been easier to be on the same media platform as the current president. It has also never been easier to speak directly into his ear. Social media has made it possible for anyone with the correct video or marketing skills to feel as trusted as the *New York Times*, and Trump has made it just as easy to contribute in ways that feel identical to the president.[3]

What makes today's wheat paste posters unique, and different from the above example of Gran Fury, is that the activists using wheat paste posters are actively choosing to disengage with the platform of choice for viewers to get their news, and for the president to communicate his policies and goals. This direct refusal to engage solely on social media when the outcome reward can be so high, and the threshold for use is so low shows a unique moment for physical and tactile activism, and wheat paste posters specifically in Washington, D.C. This moment of refusal of the mainstream methods of communication is what I hope to explain in this analysis.

[3] Of course, it is impossible to ignore that this second Trump administration is creating the condition of suppression, too. Trump is increasingly moving towards authoritarian tendencies, and political scientists polled over time by Bright Line Watch have noted a sharp slide into authoritarianism since Trump has taken office for the second time (Langfitt). This has included, in terms of the current social media and news landscape, Trump making moves to flood the zone, or overwhelm the news media so that the message reporting on him, or organizing against him, becomes more diluted (Broadwater). This is while the rapid understanding that the current social media platforms are private has developed, with their algorithms becoming more transparent to the public and their owners often aligning themselves with Trump, such as Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg. This two-pronged suppression has certainly driven people to more nontraditional and analog methods of protest and information dissemination. However, it does not contradict the uniqueness of today in the ability to place oneself on the same platform as the president, CEOs, and senators. Instead, it further highlights this decision and how unique wheat paste posters have become in the current landscape.

Shifting Media Ecology and the Staying Power of Wheat Paste Posters

One method for analyzing this movement to wheat paste posters is to look through the lens of Innis, who provides a framework to use media to explain the culture of a given society. While Innis has written prolifically on this subject, I will be focusing primarily on his ideas introduced in the 1949 article, "The Bias of Communication." In this article, Innis introduces the symbiotic relationship between cultural and state development and communication technology through providing a series of historical examples. As Innis summarizes in the introduction of this work,

> A medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time and it becomes necessary to study its characteristics in order to appraise its influence in a cultural setting. According to its characteristics it may be better suited to the dissemination of knowledge over time than over space, particularly if the medium is heavy and durable and not suited to transportation; or to the dissemination of knowledge over space than over time, particularly if the medium is light and easily transported. The relative emphasis on time or space will imply a bias of significance to the culture in which it is embedded (457).

Therefore, it becomes clear throughout the article that a culture can be analyzed through the media they choose to use. Innis argues that cultural communication is built to either be disseminated widely, through space, or is built to last, through time. This is a reflexive influence, where the civilization and the media inform one another. The type of civilization would influence either light, space-based form of communication, like the papyrus, or a heavy, time-based form of communication, like a stone tablet or the pyramids (Innis, 458). This is relevant to the current rise of wheat paste posters because they are a disruption of the societal trend toward space-based media.

While these categories of communication media are obviously not exclusive to one another, the focus on time- or space- forward communications is informative to the priorities of

the culture and society of the time. As Blondheim succinctly puts it, Innis "emerges as a through and through social constructivist, holding that technological change is engineered and affected by society's strategies and choices… [Innis] posits that the social dog wags its technological tail rather than being wagged by it" (64). Innis did continuously maintain that communication and its technology, institutions, and influences, have strong deterministic effects on society, culture, and history, despite not being convinced of technological determination (Blondheim, 65). Therefore, considering the choice of medium of the communications produced by the state and the tradeoffs they make between fast spreading and long-lasting media is critically informative to Innis. Looking at our current digital landscape, the United States is favoring a space-forward method of communication. The flood the zone strategy of the Trump administration relies on this.

Innis continued to write extensively about this binary choice and its expansion into 20th century politics in his book *Empire and Communication*. Regarding the evolution of print media, Innis writes that "concentration on a medium of communication implies a bias in the cultural development of the civilization concerned either towards an emphasis on space and political organization or towards an emphasis on time and religious organization" (170). In the rise of newspapers, and to further extend his idea, to television and other seemingly instant forms of media like social media, the United States has placed an emphasis on political organization and rapid, fleeting communication. This creates, Innis argues, instability based on the dependence on space-oriented communication (170). Mullen supports this reading of television as a space biased based on its "sheer colonizing power" and immediate reach and attention, despite its static existence in many North American homes (182). It is important to note that Innis did not believe in the unilateral choice of one type of media over the other, despite his criticism of the contemporary bent towards space-oriented rapid communication. Instead, Innis argues that a

balance of the two is inherent to the success of a society or government (Mullen, 176). Further, the rise of even faster and more space-oriented media than the newspaper has shifted the balance of media further towards the rapid. Therefore, moving to analyze wheat paste posters, it is vital to understand this imbalance. It can help situate the wheat paste poster in the time that it is operating in. A poster used as WWII propaganda, for example, within the context of the media landscape is very space oriented. However, surrounded by the social media landscape, the wheat paste poster becomes more time oriented.

Catherine Frost provides a helpful distinction in the concerns Innis had about the creation of new media and how they might shape social systems of organization. She spells out two methods of control, monopolies of content and economic monopolies. Monopolies of content relate to how a new medium influence the content that is then disseminated. The medium influences which messages are widely distributed. For example, the advent of the printing press led to a higher demand for novels and fiction, giving "rise to Romanticism" (Frost). The economic monopoly relates to how new media monopolies drive economic impact. The rise of the printing press, to continue the same example, led to an increased reliance on publishing and printmaking, impacting the economy, and therefore laws and regulations, of society in England. As Frost says, the possibility of either monopoly, according to Innis, was cause for concern on the equilibrium of the society and their communication methods. Frost writes that "estimating the monopoly potential of a new medium, therefore… helps us determine where pressure is building up within the system and helps us map the major societal fault lines that develop after the arrival of a new medium." The medium, and its influence, feeds back into society, continuing the symbiotic expression of societal power and communication media. Frost expands on this notion of monopoly by weaving in the moral stakes of this balance of communication styles and

avoidance of monopoly. She complicates Richard Noble's characterization that Innis' moral stance favors time-oriented media to simply achieve the liberal goal of preserving freedom against monopolies (Noble, 37). Frost argues, instead, that there is less of a utilitarian concern in Innis' work, but instead a humanist concern to maintain societal and governmental longevity to reduce suffering and upheaval. These are the stakes that set the stage for the balance of time- and space-oriented media.

This balance comes into question, namely, with the rise of a social, internet-based culture. The rapid communication of the internet, media dissemination happening minutes after an even with unfettered access to ephemeral news, is a space-oriented medium. Frost posits that the advent of the internet as a new culturally relevant form of media, while complicated thanks to the multifaceted nature of online communication, has a large potential for monopoly. First, she argues that while the internet seems communal, it is populated disproportionately by the affluent, and there is a technological line between those who only consume content, and those who create it. On the economic side, the monopoly of content on the internet leans toward promoting entities with the cash flow to stand out on private serves, categorizing the internet writ large as a "controlled commercial product rather than an open public infrastructure" (Frost). Therefore, business and economic interests control the message of the internet, and impacts not just what, but how consumers view content.

While the internet is not tangible, Frost argues that its reach creates a strong space bias, rather than a time orientation. This is supported by the "perishable content" provided on the internet, and the centralization of authority that is created by the host of private servers. While Mullen agrees that the internet has a space bias, she notes that this is partially created by consumer behavior. She argues that consumers of the internet, as told by her students, accept

advertising messages if they are a part of a siloed interest group, making the internet narrower than it seems thanks to "news cliques" (184). This siloing, she argues, gives cultural strongholds more power, leading to increased fears of monopoly. Therefore, to look at the ruptures of these silos, it makes sense that people would turn to wheat paste posters. While they are not new, they are now so much more ubiquitous in Washington, D.C., seemingly exploding at the eve of the second Trump administration and only growing in variety and location.

The wheat paste posters are localized, and while they are easy to transport, like Innis' example of the papyrus, making them a more time-focused medium than, to continue his example, the pyramids. However, they are relatively fixed once they are pasted onto surfaces. While wheat paste posters do wear with time, they are a surprisingly durable method of communication, but as a popular medium while Gran Fury was utilizing them and were often pasted over. Therefore, in the context of the 1980s and 1990s, wheat paste posters can be considered a space-oriented medium. They are not meant to be broadcasted across airwaves, or even to be distributed across New York City uniformly in a newspaper. Instead, they have specific loci of distribution that are in a fixed medium. However, considering the norms of the time in wheat pasting culture, the positionality of the wheat paste posters are brief. This is what benefited Gran Fury as they continued to raise awareness for their cause.

Looking through the framework of Innis and time- vs. space-oriented media, one possibility why wheat paste posters are becoming more popular in the movement becomes clear. Innis categorizes time-oriented media as media that is "heavy and durable and not suited to transportation," while space-oriented media is "light and easily transported" (457). Based on this designation, wheat paste posters would be considered space-oriented media. However, Innis also shows that the reliance on space- or time-oriented media is a reflection on the cultural bias of the

time. As discussed in relation to the wheat paste posters of the 1980s, the space-oriented media has shifted. No longer are political pamphlets being handed out in the street considered to be a fast way of spreading information. Instead, it is a complete deluge of digital information at the push of a button.

Therefore, relative to this relatively new social internet, especially in the new way it delivers news, the wheat paste poster has become more time-oriented than ever. These posters lasting months if not pasted over or torn down have much more staying power than, for example, an Instagram story, which is only available for 24 hours, and often only viewed for a few seconds. Comparatively, today's wheat paste posters are incredibly time oriented. They reach much fewer viewers (even in the busiest metro station in Washington, D.C. they could reach at most just over ten thousand people if everyone travelling stopped to read the information), and last exponentially longer. Without walking across a block with the posters, it is hard to see them. They, therefore, as Innis finds critical for longevity, form a fluid rally around a fixed goal. This is like how Innis finds the success of religious movements, rather than political movements he associates with space-oriented media. The ability to provide the same message that is open to a variety of discussion and interpretation is the benefit of time-oriented media.

A great example of this is the artistic protest in Figure 7, featuring an artistic rendition of Sean Dunn throwing a sandwich at a Customs and Border Patrol officer. This social media cycle, for an event of protest, lasted longer than most in Washington, D.C. Throughout August, he got attention from residents, was fired from his job, and directly received comments from Bondi (Austermuhle, 2025). Dunn enter the cycle again when he was acquitted of the felony charges he received for his sandwich throwing in October, then left the online public mind altogether. However, the physical posters of his act remain. Figure 7 shows the posters on the bar As You

Are in the Eastern Market neighborhood as it remains in March 2026, six months after it left the public eye even in the resurgence of news following Dunn's acquittal.


*Figure 7. A series of posters memorializing Sean Dunn throwing a sandwich at a CBP officer on the corner of E St SE and 8 St SE on March 15, 2026. Photo by Chloe Irwin.*

The impact this time-oriented media has is that it builds more lasting ties to community and creates a more mythological remembrance surrounding these events and calls to action. While ICE might not be driving the same cars photographed in Figure 8, the poster is a lasting remembrance to the effort of community action. While the event promotion posters are inevitably date oriented, it is meaningful that they remain in the localized area past the protest date. They serve as reminders of the events that have happened that then hold a more lasting memory in the public eye of Washington, D.C. As Innis writes in *Empire and Communications*, "materials that emphasize time favour decentralization and hierarchical types of institutions,

while those that emphasize space favour centralization and systems of government less hierarchical in character" (7). Therefore, looking at the growing concentration of power in the Trump administration, it makes sense that the administration utilizes and encourages the fast-paced nature of the space-oriented media. Those that are creating subversive content and criticizing the administration, on the other hand, while still utilizing social media and the internet, have increasingly turned the decentralized time-oriented medium of the wheat paste poster. This shift towards a more lasting modality, therefore, makes sense for the various movements that are utilizing the medium. Even for events and set calls to action, it makes sense for the ethos of the movements to choose a more localized, time-oriented medium like wheat paste posters. Bringing wheat paste posters back into popularity in Washington, D.C. creates continuing resonance and highlights the goals of organizations to destabilize power structures in a continuously more concentrated power dynamic in the United States.


*Figure 8. A poster highlighting recent ICE activity in the area on Spring Rd NW and 14 St NW on August 27, 2025. Photo by Chloe Irwin.*

Guerilla Tactics and the Global Village: The Disruption Power of the Wheat Paste Poster

As I have argued above, looking at wheat paste posters through the lens of Innis highlights how they are disrupting the current media ecosystem through their staying power and localized interest. Further analyzing these posters through the views of McLuhan and Eco further expands upon their power to disrupt the current media landscape through localized acts of communication. While his views depart from Innis', Marshal McLuhan often credits Innis for inspiring him to think about communication media, even going as far to say that his work was a footnote to Innis' work on the subject (Chrystall).

Like Innis, McLuhan focuses on media, highlighting the importance of how something is said even over what is said. His most famous catchphrase, "the medium is the message," let to his similarly titled book, *The Medium is the Massage* in 1967. In this book, McLuhan brings together text and visual to explore how society has been shaped by communication media. To condense his argument greatly, he claims that the 'substance of a message' is not the content, but the way it is being communicated thanks to how it impacts society (10). In what seems to be direct response to Innis, McLuhan claims that "electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of 'time' and 'space' and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men" (16). Thanks to this disorientation of the internet, McLuhan coined the term the 'global village' as the return to reaction to the heavy amount of information that inundates every user, as the users have too much information on everything and everyone. Therefore, McLuhan argues that the overwhelm of electric circuitry forces us to "live mythically" even though "we continue to think fragmentarily, and on single, separate planes" (115). While McLuhan ventures farther into the realm of technological determinism throughout his classification of media and is often

criticized for placing too much emphasis on an over-inclusive version of the media, he provides a fundamental framework to build upon when considering new forms of media.

Approaching the resurgence of wheat paste posters through the lens of McLuhan applies different logic than Innis but yields a similar result. As McLuhan writes in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*,

> "Today, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extension of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society, much as have already extended our senses and our nerves by various media" (2).

This extension becomes incredibly apparent on the social internet, which was created decades after McLuhan's text. The overwhelm of technology, to McLuhan, is similar, or arguably the same, as the overwhelm of the nervous system. With this disavowing of space and time, the instantaneous and infinite nature of the social internet provides access to the feeling of tapping into the "whole of human society." This overwhelm is powerful, but disorienting. With this instantaneous overwhelm, parsing individual information out of the "technological simulation of consciousness" is impossible, like identifying a single nerve in the nervous system. While McLuhan does not take a retrospective look on how past technology can return or coexist in this new age of overwhelm, his basis of this new level of communication and interaction sets a strong stage from which to consider the resurgence of protest posters. The sequential and linear effort of print media provide a respite from the overwhelm that McLuhan describes. The posters become an extension of the eye, rather than the nervous system, and therefore direct focus accordingly.

Despite often criticizing McLuhan, Umberto Eco grants attention equal to McLuhan on the "gradual, uniform bombardment of information, where different contents are leveled and lose their differences" (3). While he agrees that communication is changed by the advent of the digital age, he provides more specificity to McLuhan's idea of media, proposing that there must be a communication chain rather than a simple medium. Most importantly to this paper, Eco argues that ambiguous messages can become clear once considering their context, or a shared code by the message sender and the message receiver (Eco, 6-7). Eco then continues his message, relating it to the current political sphere. Eco argues that

> The idea that we must ask the scholars and educators of tomorrow to abandon the TV studios or the offices of the newspapers, to fight a door-to-door guerrilla battle like provos of Critical Reception can be frightening, and can also seem utopian. But if the Communications Era proceeds in the direction that today seems to us the most probable, this will be the only salvation for free people. The methods of this cultural guerrilla have to be worked out. Probably in the interrelation of the various communications media, one medium can be employed to communicate a series of opinions on another medium. To some extent this is what a newspaper does when it criticizes a TV program. But who can assure us that the newspaper article will be read in the way we wish? Will we have to have recourse to another medium to teach people how to read the newspaper in a critical fashion? (13-14).

Eco proposes that a radical shift to "nonindustrial forms of communication" can be the basis of the future subversive communication because the clarity of those narrowcast media limit the rate of renewed reinterpretations and instead leave the message free for the receiver to decode at will (14). As Gary Genosko explains, Eco puts the power of influence in the hands of the receiver (102). This influence is a based on the combination of the media and the message that it is communicating from the sender, expanding beyond the focus that McLuhan brings to the medium alone.

These central figures in media studies come together to create a foundational understanding on which to apply a variety of new, or resurgent, media. As Carey writes,

"McLuhan himself is the ultimate verification of the more prophetic aspects of Innis' work… the hegemony of science over religion, of technical authority over moral authority, has been accomplished" (39). McLuhan builds on the foundations of Innis' work to prophesize a new categorization of media. As communication forges on, instantaneously being transported to the receiver, or in this age, the viewer, it is worth noting that McLuhan's departure from the typographic man, as has been noted by many, matches uncannily to our current era of social media. This is true, but it is also equally possible to create a nuanced version of Innis' dilogy of media types that applies to current forms of media. While reading these texts together may seem counterintuitive because of their direct, differing conversations surrounding how media shapes society and vice versa, it is beneficial to place them in conversation with one another thanks to the connected outcomes they bring when read together. Not just despite, but because of their disagreements over a shared basis of communication theory, Innis, McLuhan, Eco, and the scholars that engage with each of these foundational sources provide a strong basis from which to analyze a cultural communication trend from a variety of different angles, providing a summative view on how that trend might be shaping society, and how society has shaped it. Their discordant views on communication theory work unexpectedly well in a quickly evolving media landscape. Together, they can be utilized to form a new understanding of how resurgent media might be beneficial to, as Eco calls it, guerilla forms of communicating in localized settings. In this case, they form a strong basis for the analysis of the resurgence of wheat paste posters in the 21st century.

At least looking at the wheat paste posters of Gran Fury, the creation of these posters could be argued to be industrial, combatting Eco's message of guerilla warfare. After all, the posters are mass printed and distributed. However, I argue that in comparison to other forms of

mass media in the 1980s, this is a relatively anti-industrial method of communication. ACT UP had historically struggled to garner attention for the HIV/AIDS epidemic, as had the other organizations working towards funding for research on the disease. This is because the avenues of mass communication were not granted for the conversations that ACT UP wanted to have. Therefore, they had to employ these guerilla tactics that Eco advocates for, and they arguably succeeded in their messaging goals for the poster, accounting for a variety of interpretations thanks to the nature of the medium.

Eco supports this reading of McLuhan's view of the chaotic and all-consuming message that the social internet spreads, albeit adding a call to action to the reading I hold of the impact of a return to an older 'age' of communication media. The shift towards less industrial forms of communication allows for repeated reinterpretations of the viewer (Eco, 14). In the case of the wheat paste poster, the long-standing message makes this reinterpretation on reengagement possible. There is an unexpectedness to seeing a political call to action on a street corner in today's digital era, or the side of a bar. This play into the "cultural guerrilla" that Eco calls for continues to explain a new idea behind the logic of the wheat paste posters. The surprise of this unexpected medium of communication in the technological age provides a new way for viewers to engage with the act of protest. This door-to-door battle opens specific methods of engagement, but it does not dictate the reaction or interpretation of any passerby that might view the wheat paste posters. This, according to Eco, allows the viewer to do the interpretive work of decoding, the power of which is more powerful in a set, unexpected "guerrilla" medium.

## Conclusion

In the wheat paste poster, I have proposed that we can see a return to more fixed media, which is resurging to hold a respite from the fast-paced era of the age of the social internet, where the overwhelm of information prevents the flexibility of viewers. By returning to wheat paste posters, the longevity and unexpectedness of the medium provide an opportunity to engage with new audiences and engage with the same audience that might find the same content online in a more lasting way. This, I propose, is a potential interpretation of why wheat paste posters have made such a strong comeback in Washington, D.C., where the overwhelming interaction with systems of power on the internet create a need for this more tactile and visual effort of subversive political engagement.

Looking forward, there is an opportunity to continue this research in multiple avenues. First, I have taken a U.S. centric view of this issue thanks to my work in documenting the wheat paste posters in Washington, D.C. However, I have seen, based on my limited scope, wheat paste posters in a variety of other locations calling for political action. The expansion beyond a more localized view could further expand this research, especially in the involvement of other administrations and their actions on the internet beyond the Trump administration in the United States. Alongside this, there is the opportunity to apply scholars beyond the foundational messages of Innis, McLuhan, and Eco to the medium of the wheat paste poster. While I believe that these scholars offer strong methods from which to interpret the medium, there are further opportunities in the continuously growing field of communication media. Looking forward in time, I am eager to see how this movement of a return to more tactile and simplified mediums continues past the current Trump administration, and if the wheat paste poster will have staying power in the digital age.

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