Media and the Masses: Information Culture in the Victorian Industrial Novel
The discovery of an innocuous scrap of paper momentarily unites the contradictory plots that have frustrated generations of attempts to explain the narrative logic of Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1848 novel, *Mary Barton*. However, while many acknowledge the scene’s role in the resolution of what Catherine Gallagher calls the text’s “generic eclecticism,” none have yet observed that the brief section also announces the novel’s central concern with the human cost of changing media paradigms—one it shares with the small but contested company of Victorian industrial novels that form the object of this dissertation.

The scene finds Esther Barton, the estranged aunt of the novel’s heroine, stumbling across the piece of paper that will redeem her niece’s working-class lover from accusations that falsely name him the murderer of a local manufacturer’s son, allowing a story that begins with the ominous threat of class warfare to close with a comforting, class-appropriate marriage. While Esther recognizes the faded handwriting on the note, she is illiterate and cannot read its message. Consequently, she identifies the note’s writer, but misidentifies its meaning—a failure emphasized by the scene’s conspicuous repetition of the word “information,” and one which forces the reader to consider the opacity of the medium of writing for this working-class woman. By foregrounding Esther’s clumsiness with the coded content of the paper, the scene indicates its larger concern with systems of knowledge and their availability, the stakes of which are later heightened when the transmission of this “information” requires Esther to substitute her own body for the written word, suffering abuse and eventually death for her effort. The novel thus exposes an underside of the media logic that considers human and textual bodies as equivalent platforms for information: the risks to the individual subject are far greater when that information is hosted on the body, but media accessibility is subject to social realities that lie outside individual control. In the case of the industrial novel, the question of media leads straight into the inner workings of an economic system premised on inequality and exploitation.

The relationship between information and human bodies features in many examples of the Victorian social-problem novel, “Condition-of-England” novel or industrial novel. These overlapping terms describe a body of fiction that responds to the social imbalances of a rapidly industrializing English society, including Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* (1854), Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855) and George Eliot’s *Felix Holt* (1866), as well as lesser studied works by Frances Trollope, Harriet Martineau and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna. My dissertation will investigate these novels from a perspective informed by media theory, asking how our understanding of the genre changes when we consider the varying levels of access its characters possess to the strategies for information management that were reshaping how the Victorians conceived of their own population. I thus depart from a critical history that has traditionally distinguished the personal and political investments of these works so as either to reconcile them—most recently by valorizing an alternative epistemology of affect that ignores the actual fates of many characters within the genre—or, following Raymond Williams’s influential assessment, to dismiss the entire genre as a failed political project. Instead, I consider the demands placed on individual subjects, varied according to the markers of class, gender, and ethnicity, when the human body is reduced to its capacity as a medium for the storage and transmission of information. Against a critical consensus that takes these works to mitigate social injustice with the tepid solution of cross-class identification, my research will show them to place bodies, in their instrumentalization as media, at the center of our attention. Theorizing the shared role of body and text as informational media rewrites the problem of generic eclecticism that has puzzled critics of industrial novels, figuring it not just as a formal response to a changing epistemological ground, but as an exploration of the material consequences that such shifts entail for the working-class members of Victorian industrial society.

A central point of my study is the relationship between emergent technologies of information management, and the role that these technologies played in restructuring industrial society. My dissertation will situate the Victorian industrial novels in the context of this informational turn, demonstrating the value of reading the novels for what they reveal about the consequences of converting human bodies into
information. If the industrial novel negotiates the informational capacities of socially marked bodies, it does so in dialogue with a series of historically specific changes in the way information was attained, organized, and disseminated. Mary Poovey notes that these works emerge at a crucial stage in the development of modern epistemology marked by enthusiasm for the organizational potential of a set of newly available conceptual tools, including statistical data collection and the national census, ethnography and anthropology, and a nascent science of criminology. Alice Jenkins and Catherine Gallagher further elaborate this epistemological shift: Gallagher explains how political economists at the turn of the century at once stressed the importance of the worker’s body for the labour theory of value, and yet evacuated its materiality so that it could serve as the “primary nexus of exchange” through which the value of commodities could be determined (Body Economic 22). Jenkins approaches this problem through a cultural history of “progress” in the mathematical sciences, legible for Victorians under the banner “the march of the mind,” which linked new models of abstract thought in the sciences to campaigns for the education of the masses (9). Each of these developments supported a national effort to convert an expanding mass of impoverished human bodies into a more manageable, abstract population. At an individual scale, they refigured bodies as “biomedia,” a term Eugene Thacker uses to describe the informatization of bodies in the present day, but that is equally appropriate to these nineteenth-century trends. My focus on bodies avoids the recent trend, manifest in the work of Tamara Ketebgian, Thomas Recchio, Sarah Dredge and others, that forgets the brutal ends of working-class characters in order to celebrate the agency they supposedly receive through fictional representation, but it also retrieves the novels from an entrenched tradition of evaluative criticism that reduces them to their failure to achieve, even in fictional terms, the abolition of class hierarchy.

My introductory chapter will outline prevalent instances of early-Victorian abstractions of the body, clarify their relation to the economic system of industrial capitalism, and show how grasping the body as informational media helps us understand these novels as interventions into these discourses. Three focused chapters will follow, organized around the function of specific types of bodies within the industrial novel: first, I will illustrate the medial role of the living female body, focusing especially on Gaskell’s heroines; then, I will explore the genre’s treatment of the working child, beginning with instances of manual child labour in Dickens’s novels and concluding with the child as information-worker in Hard Times; lastly, I will examine the figure of the corpse as information’s dead-end, contrasting scenes from representative novels with contemporaneous non-fiction accounts of mortality in working-class districts. A final chapter will place the project within what literary scholars now designate a “media archaeology”—a mode of inquiry that has its foundations in the work of Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault, but that reaches forward to explore the possibilities for humanist scholarship on the digital horizon. In so doing, this chapter will respond to John Guillory’s call to loosen the media concept from its hardened affiliation with film and computer technology, demonstrating, through analysis of the mediating bodies of industrial fiction, the light that the concept can shed on a longer and more complex human history of information. Crucially, this perspective also brings the political and ethical ramifications of media change back into a digital humanities conversation in which they have frequently been marginalized.

I began work on this topic with a SSHRC funded MA, completed in August 2013. To date, I have taken three seminars in Victorian literature, three in cultural theory, and one in print culture, each of which contributes to my understanding of the evolution of the media concept. Presently beginning doctoral studies in the Department of English at Simon Fraser University, I am well placed to carry this experience into my future project. I will benefit from the guidance of my supervisor, Dr. Carolyn Lesjak, who has worked extensively on the industrial novel and novel form, and also from the support of Dr. Margaret Linley, whose expertise on media and print cultures has also influenced my research. My project is further informed by my role as a research assistant attached to Simon Fraser’s Lake District collection, which places me in constant negotiation with the problems and the potential of new media, with print and computer databases, and with tools for the mapping, tracing, and cataloging of literary history that have
developed concurrently with the field of digital humanities scholarship. This project will unite these skills to reinstate material media within the epistemological confusion of the industrial novel, and hopes also to show what present-day approaches to new media can learn from the parallel efforts of these early-Victorian texts.