



# A Tribute to Dallas Smythe: Confronting Communication under Capitalism

Thomas Guback

Dallas Smythe died four years ago — and right up to the end, he was speaking and writing. Much of Smythe's work was both fundamental and openly engaged. Therefore, it was radical — radical in the political sense of being Left — and radical in the lexical sense of being at the root. To this day, I am struck by the fact that Smythe, trained as an economist, wrote accessible text that could be understood by a non-specialized audience. I think we need to take that to heart, otherwise we wind up talking to ourselves in a convoluted language that makes a mockery of the term "democratic communication."

I am also struck that Smythe did not write for the journals in economics or public policy. He did not write for what some communication scholars consider "the major journals in the field"—those titles we like to have on our vitae. Much of what he wrote was published in relatively obscure places. And when I was editing his material for the book I did about him (Guback, 1994), I discovered that much of what he wrote was never published at all.

His work was confrontational. It had qualities that, some would argue, did not meet the rigorous standards of social science scholarship. Yet, the lesson we can learn from

Smythe is that the benchmarks of social science scholarship may be irrelevant for doing something about the problems our societies face these days.

Smythe led an engaged life without artificial barriers between what one believes, what one teaches, and how one lives. There was a unity of thought and action. And I might add that this kind of unity was both a benefit and a curse—a benefit because it allowed a wholeness in life—a curse because every moment of life is also a political moment of analysis and confrontation.

This unity of thought and action also came at another price. His papers and speeches made partisans of many, but they also made foes because Smythe was not afraid to speak his mind. And where people stood in relation to his work could not always be predicted from a simple political test. It may be surprising but it's true some foes emerged from the very ranks of those we would have expected to be standing shoulder to shoulder with him. Sometimes the sharpest assaults on his work, on the approach he developed, came from those who claimed to be working in "the Marxist tradition." But as Smythe said to me once, "I think action is the name of the game—and the exegesis of text in media doesn't give rise to any action."

Some of Smythe's work was theoretical. His position on the audience commodity and the labor done by audience members remains an important contribution to communication scholarship. Some of his work also had a very practical impact on policy—first, at the FCC in the 1940s and later especially in UNESCO from the 1960s through the early 1970s. He played an important role in laying the groundwork for the anti-free flow position in UNESCO that challenged the hegemony of Western powers. His work helped clarify the concerns of many countries about their sovereignty and cultural integrity in a

world dominated by transnational corporations. For his native Canada, he believed there was no longer any middle ground between true autonomy and sovereignty and total integration with the United States (Smythe, 1981). As he put it in the late 1980s, "It may now be too late for the autonomy course to succeed, but it is certainly not too late to *try* to make it work."

Smythe never gave up and that it a lesson we need to keep in mind especially in the U.S. as the political and economic choices narrow—as the political and economic debate becomes more uni-linear—and, regrettably, as some on the Left drift to accommodating, apologizing for, or outrightly disregarding capitalist domination. I think the range of our public discussion is severely compressed, compared to what it was fifty or sixty years ago.

Dallas Smythe's work opened the door to a discipline. One part of his legacy to us rests on his acknowledgment a half century ago of the growing importance of mass media. He accepted the general conclusion of others that the mass media are important components of modern society. But he took that a couple of steps further. First, he added telegraph, telephone, satellites, and mail to complete the communication system. Second, he acknowledged that the system deserved serious study, but he recognized that it required analysis, particularly economic analysis, from a fresh perspective. So, he constructed a synthesis grounded in radical political economy—a synthesis that understands the communication system as a central feature of North American—and later, global—capitalism. The major thrust of that synthesis, if I may risk reducing it to one question, asked: what role for capital does the communication system play?

These days that question seems basic to many of us, but that is because we have been illumined by the answers that question has produced. That question has become the

starting point for the critical research that has invigorated the analysis of communication. That question asked us to confront the communication system in a new way, and, for example, to see its ownership form and structure not as something neutral or benign or unimportant—but as an active determiner in the first instance. It is that unique economic perspective that is the second part of his legacy to us.

---

Smythe encouraged us to see  
communication as an institution  
in the service of capitalism

---

Yes, capital does matter. Yes, capital has not been replaced by information. Yes, capital cannot be nuanced and massaged out of the limelight. That synthesis—the joining of political economy to the study of communication has allowed us to clarify—Smythe liked to use the word “demystify”—where communication stands in relation to the economic—to see communication not just as entertainment or information, not just as the source of effects, not just as a shaper of ideology, or as something to be reinvented by interpretive communities. The synthesis allows us to see the communication system as a locus of economic and political power, as a creator of surplus value, and as the centerpiece of the corporate market system. Smythe encouraged us to see communication as an institution in the service of capital. And he was concerned not just with *describing* this communication system, he was also devoted to *changing* it and the global corporate economic system of which it is a spearhead.

The Dallas Smythe Award keeps his contributions

alive and fresh in our minds. But this award is not about him, or about me. It is about you. Without you, there would be no Union for Democratic Communications. You have held this organization together much longer than some people thought it would exist and the early days of this organization had some very fragile moments. I went back into my files to April 1981—to Philadelphia—where the UDC was founded. There were about 75 of us that night. Twelve were put on the organizing committee and eleven met the following morning. Janet Wasko, Karen Paulsell, Serafina Bathrick, Noreene Janus, Tim Haight, Linda Mitchell, James Miller, Oscar Gandy, Vinny Mosco, Manji Pendakur, and me. I'm sure none of us could have seen where the UDC would be fifteen years later and that so many of us would be getting together in Chicago.

So, this award celebrates you—I accept it in your names because the UDC continues to be a vibrant force for highlighting problems and solutions and for bringing radical critique to the field of communications. I accept it because the UDC embraces practitioners, activists, academics, and those who are lucky enough to be all three.

I accept it because more than ever we need the UDC and what it stands for—to call out to people who want justice, equality, freedom, and true democracy—to call out to people that there is another way and to keep a radical, progressive agenda alive and kicking.

*Thomas Guback is the Director of Graduate Studies in the College of Communication at the University of Illinois.*

#### Works Cited

- Guback, Thomas, ed. *Counter-Clockwise: Perspectives on Communication*. Boulder: Westview, 1994.
- Smythe, Dallas. *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1981.