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## **Critical Concepts**

### **Media Relations and Media Product: Audience Commodity**

#### **Lee Artz**

Over 50 years ago Dallas Smythe found the antidote. He was the first scholar to publish the scientific rationale for rejecting the ideological romanticism of U.S. mass communication research.<sup>1</sup> Smythe insisted that the political economy of the commercial media—and their source of profits—best explained the processes and practices. After years as an FCC economic analyst of the radio and telegraph industry and several content analyses of television programming, Smythe observed that audiences were “products” that commercial networks sold to corporate advertisers. Smythe recognized that audiences were subjected to programming which was produced, distributed, and promoted to meet the interests of advertisers who ultimately funded private television and developed media technology for profit. These identifiable relations helped clarify much of the operation, and reception, of media in the United States.

Smythe also spoke frequently at international conferences on media and technology, offering valuable theoretical and practical observations in defense of cultural diversity and democratic access to the media and deserving of recuperation and reconsideration. However, although many of Smythe’s concerns have been championed and popularized in international communication discourse, his observations regarding the function of audiences in the media process have been less visible. In fact, despite cogent argument and ample evidence, his perspective on the commodity audience has been institutionally shunned by academic departments across the U.S. for some fifty years—ironically indicating the need for a similar political economy of academe—and prompting this essay’s restatement and critique of his theoretical claims and his practical suggestions concerning audience-as-commodity. Although others have pursued the path laid by Smythe’s observations and several have even extended his approach to media audiences in critically useful ways,<sup>2</sup> my purpose here is more limited: to briefly recap Smythe’s insights while suggesting that his political economy approach deserves more recognition and appreciation within media studies.<sup>3</sup>

#### **On Margins and Markets**

Certainly many of Smythe’s students, inspired and convinced by his work, have

made remarkable contributions pursuing some of the trajectories he laid out, but his legacy is absent from most accounts of mass communication research traditions. From 1948, when Smythe began teaching the first ever political economy of media course in the U.S. at the University of Illinois, despite being subjected to a House Un-American Activities Committee investigation and slander campaign, and long after his 1963 move to Canada where he continued teaching and writing, through the publication of Thomas Guback's edited collection of Smythe's work, his theoretical and political challenges to the capitalist status quo and its preferred communication theories have been pushed to the margins.<sup>4</sup> His 1951 essay, "The Consumer's Stake in Television," published in the *Quarterly of Film Radio and Television*, which first intimated his theory of audience-as-product, preceded by several years the popular and long-lasting journalism text, *Four Theories of the Press*, by Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm.<sup>5</sup> However, Siebert and company championed the accepted free market ideology of cold war America, arguing that media systems could be differentiated by philosophical preferences for freedom and control while ignoring how market imperatives in production, distribution, and regulation influence commercial media products, from programming to audiences. Unsurprisingly, Smythe's critique of commercial media was never well-received by commercial media or their government supporters, whereas Schramm and other leading developmental and administrative researchers (backed by government and corporate funding) were well-positioned to establish their pluralist "market place of ideas" perspective as the academic norm for explaining and studying mass communication systems and practices. Nonetheless, Smythe's political economy has more scientific rigor, validity, and reliability; relies on the continuing contradictions of corporate media practices to demonstrate its efficacy; and continues to fill pockets of appreciation among a growing number of international media scholars and activists.

Smythe's approach to the study of media institutions and practices is quite distinct from many contemporary political economy of media studies which more narrowly focus on ownership and consolidation.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, his work approaches what Vincent Mosco advises for the future of political economy—a greater concern with social and cultural relations and the political and social consequence of industry practices that advance particular economic interests.<sup>7</sup> Smythe's analysis focuses on the kernel of capitalist media: the actual market imperatives which drive, organize, and over-determine its programming content. He was not misled by ideological justifications. As he wrote in a review of Schramm's *Responsibility in Mass Communication*, preferences for market-based theories of media are "self-serving rationale(s) used by politicians and businessmen to ornament operations" for less noble purposes.<sup>8</sup> For Smythe, theories of media need be historical and in context: "doctrines (not 'theories') of press freedom grow out of the class and power structures of societies and differ in relation to *whose* freedom is protected, restraints from *what sources*, and in the service of *what value patterns or policies*."<sup>9</sup> Contrary to Schramm's apologetic romanticizing of moral truths in the so-called "social responsibility theory" whereby the elite press best represents the interests of the public against incursions by government censors, Smythe emphasizes the public relations benefit of a theory which obscures and protects business activities from public

scrutiny and criticism. He also insists on recognizing economic relations and their impact. In reality, the need for “huge capital requirements to enter publishing of newspapers, mass circulation magazines, TV and motion pictures, effectively closes off easy access to the ranks of mass media entrepreneurs. Hence, the only way that deviant ideas can get access to the public is by courtesy of the conservatives who operate the mass media. As [Robert] Merton and [Paul] Lazarsfeld point out, this bias serves to shield the existing business organization from criticism.”<sup>10</sup> For Smythe, the “social responsibility theory” in the U.S. is no different than the press doctrine in the Soviet Union of the 1950s: “In both cases, the press is effectively dominated by the dominant class . . . [and] press ‘freedom’ serves the policies and values of the dominant class. . . .”<sup>11</sup> Unheeded, Smythe’s concern for political and economic materiality of media relations and practices would lead academe to ignore the public need for media scrutiny of corporations. Given the failure of the media in covering the (weapons of mass destruction, Al-Qaeda terrorist connection, and imminent terrorist threat) lead-up to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, it would seem Smythe was too sanguine about the media’s scrutiny of government, as well—a troubling observational error given Smythe’s knowledge of and experience with government advocacy of RCA’s private monopoly of radio<sup>12</sup> the television manufacturers’ and broadcasting industry’s influence over FCC regulations during the 1950s,<sup>13</sup> and his awareness of the “new struggle for markets by giant corporations” seeking commercial satellite systems after Sputnik was launched by the Soviet Union.<sup>14</sup> More importantly, it seems Smythe’s alert regarding public scrutiny of corporate activity, the government, and the media themselves has been largely disregarded if the predominance of advertising, public relations, and marketing degrees at esteemed U.S. universities is any indication. Few have comparable programs for public media, labor communication, or environmental communication which do not ultimately serve to improve business functioning and corporate or government public relations. Indeed, contrary to the non-chalant resignation of John Peters and Peter Simonson, it was not “the gods that left us with Wilbur Schramm and company,”<sup>15</sup> but less lofty actors who worked diligently to establish institutions of class power, including academic programs that have popularized theories which justify those relations.

It is unlikely Smythe found god-work in the collaboration of commercial networks, ad agencies, and private corporations that created the U.S. media system, although there is a certain magic in the way citizens have been transformed into consumers. Still, it is no illusion to see that publics and audiences have been neatly packaged into marketable commodities produced and sold by television programmers.

Often considered “free” by consumers, television has always been a commercial enterprise in the United States but seldom understood in its entirety. The complexity of the industry and its socio-cultural consequence have confounded researchers for decades, as discrete parts of the whole, including audiences, have been thoroughly analyzed at the expense of an over-arching understanding of the class nature of media institutions and practices. Recovering Smythe’s insights and methodology could begin to resolve this dilemma.

## Media Economics

“In the first place there is a group of products and services . . . receiving sets . . . attachments and antennas. There is electric power. There are replacement parts. . . .” writes Smythe.<sup>16</sup> Fifty years on we have FM and XFM radio, cable-ready television, satellite radio and TV receivers, plasma screen and LCD monitors, HDTV, DVD players, and other communication hardware as media products. Moreover, at least since the government-backed formation of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), in the United States, and the capitalist world in general, profit-seeking corporations provide the impetus for research and development, production and distribution, conditions for the personal and social use of media technology, technical standards, and regulatory guidelines or rules. It is almost unremarkable that media content providers, such as television networks and programmers, trumpet each innovation as a benefit for consumers;<sup>17</sup> content providers need content deliverers (manufacturers of television, satellite, internet receivers, etc.) to communicate with audiences. Yet, while media technology greatly affects the form and delivery of media content, media technology is produced primarily for sale to individual consumers. Thus, once a market is saturated, as with television sets in the US where some 98% of homes have at least one set, manufacturers must rely on recurring sales through the planned obsolescence of equipment, from the introduction of new products which consumers can be persuaded to want (such as cell phones, cell phones with cameras, or I-pod-ready phones with additional options), or from technical innovations which consumers will need to access content (such as color television, digital receivers, or HDTV). As Smythe explains:

Replacement markets are generated by designed obsolescence: by style changes and by deliberate standards of quality in manufacture which produce tolerably short product lives and the predictable “junking” of familiar products (because it would cost more to repair them than to replace them). And the stylistic features of all consumer goods and services based on the calculated manipulation of public taste so that consumers increasingly pay for images rather than use-values.<sup>18</sup>

Five decades ago, Smythe noted that absent political power, “consumers must depend passively on corporate decisions to innovate.”<sup>19</sup> In short, media technology is always an important ingredient in the communication process and media practice, even more significantly in the capitalist world, the manufacture of media technology is profit-driven in its development and use. The cost to individual consumers appears as a primary concern for Smythe in many of his writings.

Likewise, although Smythe did not emphasize the *economic* parameters of media content per se—he omitted it entirely in his 1951 essay and only addressed it directly in the context of pay-TV in a 1958 essay<sup>20</sup>—movies, television and radio programs, magazines and their articles, and other media content are also commercial media products. Networks, studios, and independent producers create programs by producing stories, scripts, and media commodities which are owned or sold to

networks as a means for attracting reading and viewing audiences. This content can also be sold, or re-sold through syndication to other broadcast and cable networks, offered for purchase on pay-per-view TV, repackaged as video and CD product, or copyrighted and “synergistically” produced in other media products such as books, computer programs, and internet websites or non-media products such as apparel, games, and toys. For some media content producers, the marketing of content as end-product is quite lucrative: movies, books, magazines, etc. However, for radio and television networks, programming has much more value as a means, a vehicle, a recruiting tool for producing a more important product: the audience.

In Smythe’s early considerations of the economic value of audiences he struggles to explain “station time and...audience loyalty” as something more: “a *program for the audience* (in whose continuing loyalty the station has a vital interest), and *the probability of developing audience loyalty to the advertiser*.”<sup>21</sup> Smythe recognizes the economic relationship between advertiser and the corporate product sponsor—commodity producers pay ad agencies for the advertiser’s product: the broadcast commercial, the published ad, or the billboard, etc. He also identifies the source of profit for the corporate product depends on whether “audience response results in the ringing of cash registers where the sponsor’s product is sold to the ultimate producer.”<sup>22</sup> However it is only in his “Communications: Blindspot of Marxism” essay in 1977 that Smythe more fully articulates his theory of audience-as-commodity, although still conceiving of audience *time* as commodity.<sup>23</sup>

Smythe asks, “What is the commodity form of mass-produced, advertiser-supported communications under monopoly capitalism?” The materialist answer, writes Smythe, is audiences, including readerships. Under contemporary capitalism, “all non-sleeping time of most of the population is work time. This work time is devoted to the production of commodities in general (both where people get paid for their work and as members of audiences) and in the production and reproduction of labor power (the pay for which is subsumed in their income). Of the off-the-job work time, the largest single block is time of the audiences which is sold to advertisers. It is not sold by workers but by the mass media of communications.”<sup>24</sup> Smythe details this process by suggesting that advertisers “buy the services of audiences with predictable specifications who will pay attention in predictable numbers and at predictable times to particular means of communication (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, billboards, and third-class mail). As collectivities these audiences are commodities. As commodities they are dealt with by producers and buyers (the latter being advertisers).”<sup>25</sup> Audiences have more or less value depending on their demographics and the value of those demographics to particular product producers: denture manufacturers value over-50 viewers, candy manufacturers prefer younger viewers, beer producers target males 21-34, and so on.

### **Audience Power, Audience Profit**

Whether one accepts Smythe’s portrayal of television viewing as working at “the production and reproduction of labour power”<sup>26</sup> - an important theoretical claim in and of itself—the immediately applicable portion of his theoretical presentation of

audience as commodity is that audiences are assembled as commodities which have exchange value for programmers and advertisers. At the elementary level—again, leaving aside the question of audience “work” - audiences are constructed, created, produced by television and radio programmers and print publishers as discrete goods which have value to advertisers. Audiences can thus be sold to advertisers for their exchange value - they are useful to advertisers who need viewers and readers who will attend to their persuasive messages. The larger the audience and the more the audience has demographic (and psychographic?) characteristics matching the demographics of real and potential consumers, the more value that particular audience has to an advertiser. Here then is the real significance of Smythe’s discovery: “in economic terms the main function of the mass media in this system is to produce audiences prepared to be dutiful consumers... The real end-product is the commodity to be sold, and the audience produced by the mass media is but part of the means to that end.”<sup>27</sup> Very quickly one realizes that the primary task facing media content producers is how to attract, capture, and deliver those audiences (and their attention) to advertisers.<sup>28</sup> In other words, media content producers create programming not for audiences per se, but for specific audiences which have exchange value, i.e., audiences which are desirable to advertisers.

Television programming thus understood appears as a lure or bait to catch and keep people paying attention to the output of the mass media enterprise. As such, the luring ‘program’ content of TV is designed to attract the particular kind of audience the advertiser plans to produce as the intermediate good to complete the marketing process for his product—the consumer. The press, TV and radio media are not primarily producing news, entertainment, or editorial opinion—none of those can be sold. Rather, the prime function of news, entertainment, and editorial programming is to produce audiences to be sold to advertisers.<sup>29</sup> Programming cannot disrupt the intended purpose for broadcast: priming audiences to buy. Audiences must be stimulated, but not reflective or thoughtful. Programming must flow with commercial spots to socialize viewers to self-interest, celebrity worship, and instant gratification—ingredients valuable to advertisers and marketers. From this more critical political economy position, we can better understand television programming decisions as actions based on market projections and share dividends, not on public preferences.

In the mid-1990s, CBS produced “*Murder, She Wrote*,” a mystery series set in a fictional seaside village in Maine, featuring an older female amateur sleuth and mystery writer. It frequently placed first among the network’s lineup in the Nielsen ratings and was a champion in its time slot, 8:00 P.M. Sundays. It finished in the Nielsen top ten during most of its run. Yet, in 1996, the show was canceled. Why? “It was one of CBS’s most successful offerings, but also among the most expensive for it to produce. Moreover, *Murder, She Wrote* skewed toward older audiences, especially older women, and advertisers will pay much more to attract younger viewers. In the 1994-95 season, the show charged lower advertising rates than competitors such as *Lois and Clark*, appearing in the same time slot on rival network, ABC. *Lois and Clark* attracted fewer viewers, but was watched by more young viewers, hence the higher advertising rate.”<sup>30</sup>

In other words, Smythe’s theory of audience-as-commodity provides the neces-

sary framework for understanding the limited influence of audience viewing preference. In terms of advertising value, the commodity known as the “Murder, She Wrote audience” had less worth than other television audiences. The aggregate size of the audience outpaced all other shows, but the size of each of its constituent components had little exchange value. CBS was producing a commodity for sale: the viewing audience. That particular audience (or audiences) had limited exchange value in the advertising market, hence, the interests of the actual viewing audience were disregarded for the interests of the profit-making imperatives of the network. “Murder, She Wrote” could not be profitably produced. It was cancelled.

Traditional media economic texts, and even some critical communications texts such as Ben Bagdakian’s *The Media Monopoly*, focus on whether advertising lowers (or raises) the costs of consumer products, including media products, and the impact of information (or ideological) content of advertisements and programs.<sup>31</sup> Others, like James Chesebro and Dale Bertlesen, view media technologies as primarily symbolic and cognitive systems, under-privileging the economic and political ingredients of any symbolic, cognitive, or technological system.<sup>32</sup> While acknowledging their indebtedness to a Marxist concern with the politics of technology, Chesebro and Bertlesen provide scant political and economic context for media culture, severely limiting the efficacy of their insights. Some more avowedly critical communication researchers attend to economic relations in general, but give short shrift to the production of audiences, and seldom center audiences as products in and of themselves. For instance, Robert McChesney’s rich polemic against “hypercommercialism” in *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* imagines the news “audience may simply disappear”<sup>33</sup>—missing the singular motivation of media networks: to produce audiences desired by advertisers through whatever entertainment or news content is cost-effective; news and ideological criteria are simply caught up in the movement of that audience-as-commodity production tide. David Crouteau and William Hoynes reflect a similar delineation: recognizing that advertisers pay a premium for targeted audiences, they nonetheless either overlook or obscure the actual financial transactions which define commercial media economic relations.<sup>34</sup> Crouteau and Hoynes argue that advertisers pay for “advertising time” and networks “generate corporate profits” by “selling” programming to teens and other preferred target audiences.<sup>35</sup> This inverts how the media production cycle functions under capitalist social relations. Media produce audiences. Programs are the means of production. Advertisers are the market for the media end-product.<sup>36</sup>

Granted, for independent producers and production studios, programs are products which are sold to networks for broadcast use. But for networks, which (with the approval of the 1996 Telecommunications Act and other FCC deregulations) have been increasingly integrated vertically to avoid the need to purchase programs, programs are not produced for direct sale (although they may have secondary market value in syndication). Rather, programs are but a necessary component in the more lucrative production of particular *audiences*.

To illustrate the distinction attending Smythe’s contribution, consider the production of automobiles. For independent contractors, windows, brakes, electronic equipment, and other auto parts are products which are sold to the auto industry (although they have value in the auto repair market, as well). However, for the auto



industry, which has increasingly integrated production vertically (not to mention globally) to limit the need to purchase automobile parts, the production of windows, brakes, and other components of cars are necessary costs in the more lucrative production and exchange of automobiles. General Motors, Ford, Toyota, and other auto corporations decide which suppliers to hire and which parts to produce in-house based on minimizing the costs of production of automobiles to maximize their sale and profit. Likewise, NBC, ABC, Viacom, and the rest of the media industry decide which independent studios to hire or which programs to produce in-house based on its need to minimize the costs of production of *audiences* for sale and profit.

According to Smythe, audiences are commodities produced, exchanged, and distributed by the television industry and the commercial media industry, in general. Networks do not seek audiences anymore than automobile manufacturers seek cars or fast-food restaurants seek hamburgers. Audiences, autos, hamburgers are products, a means to an end. Audiences are not the end-goal of the networks, anymore than automobiles are the end goal of auto manufacturers. Audiences “are not the direct ‘buyers’ of the programs.”<sup>37</sup> Yet, advertisers aren’t the direct buyers of programs, either. Audiences are the commodities which are sold to advertisers. Networks produce programs: they do not sell programs; they sell audiences. Thus, program content should not be analyzed solely in terms of its content appeal to audiences. Content should be considered equally in terms of its advertising function: attracting particular audiences for sale to particular advertisers. Advertisers have no concern for the networks’ production costs. Networks bear the costs. If a network can deliver a sizable, desirable audience—even using a poorly produced, inane show—the advertisers will pay handsomely. A creative, well-produced, critically-acclaimed program that costs the network much money impresses advertisers not at all, if the audience, whatever its size, is not a desirable commodity. Networks profit when the cost of producing the audience is less than income generated by the sale of that audience to advertisers. The cost of producing a marketable audience includes: scriptwriters; directors, producers, and editors; animators, amateurs, or actors and their attendants; set designers, lighting staff, camera crews, technicians, and diverse skilled assistants; audience researchers, promoters, etc. Thus, networks continually search for low-cost, low-risk advertising-audience friendly programs: reality television, game shows, animations; simplistic sit-coms, copy-cat programs, and the occasional spin-off. Ultimately, advertisers have little interest in the particular content of programming, because they are concerned with one criterion: will the desired audience be available for my commercial? Thus, in general, advertisers have little motivation for the censorship of ideas. Indeed, a little controversy or titillation might even improve audience size and enhance attention. Viacom’s Comedy Central network routinely airs programs that challenge decency standards that many citizens would find offensive, but because advertisers are purchasing teen (mostly white male) audiences, they “are not particularly concerned with offending other viewers.”<sup>38</sup> Advertisers only balk at content which might “damage” the desired audience product or disrupt the smooth delivery of that audience to the advertising spot. Status quo values (with a dash of trendy edginess) rule.

At first glance, it appears that Smythe’s emphasis is purely stylistic or that sub-

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sequent scholars have advanced his insights. Certainly Bagdikian, McChesney, Crouteau and Hoynes, Ron Bettig and Jeanne Lynn Hall,<sup>39</sup> and others share Smythe's concern with the commercialization of information, but there is an important distinction. Do advertisers come to active audiences or are audiences produced, sold, and delivered to advertisers? Should media activists attempt to influence media content by demonstrating to advertisers the market value of particular audiences or audience interest? Can the media industry and its regulatory agencies like the FCC be reformed and de-commercialized? Or as Smythe argued are technology and its market-culture practices intimately connected with the process of production—where the decision “to apply knowledge in some practical way—and both the knowledge in question and the practical use to which it is put arise out of the political process.”<sup>40</sup> Underscoring the audience as commodity takes us from the naïve and liberal to the profound and revolutionary: meanings, images, rhetorical tropes and other symbolic production do not appear simply, or even primarily, as part of the creative process of communication; rather, they arise in tandem as part of the material production of a commodity. In other words, the distinction clarifies the function, the power, the problem. The battle for legitimate news, creative culture, or educational programming is meaningless disconnected from the fight to wrench media production out of the hands of commercial networks and their corporate clients. Smythe guides us towards a more theoretically-grounded practical politics.

### **Theory for Action?**

Smythe admitted that he did not theoretically or politically finish the investigation or explanation of media relations, as he makes clear in his rejoinder to Graham Murdock's culturalist critique of audience-as-product.<sup>41</sup> Yet, Smythe's claim that media content and advertising have no existence separate from one another was fundamentally solid. His charge might be nuanced to hold that media content and advertising are symbiotically connected with separate agents and sites of production, but the centrality of audience-as-product to any understanding of commercial media practice holds. Smythe's case for audience-as-producer of itself seems less substantial and verifiable. Moving beyond conceptualizing audiences as commodities with marketable demographic and psychological characteristics, including consumerist proclivities, Smythe argues that audiences “produce” themselves as consumers. This is new and uneven terrain. When Budd, Craig, and Steinman note that viewers “invest money in equipment simply to watch TV programs,” “viewers pay increased prices for goods and services that are advertised,” and audiences bear the additional costs of time as well as damage to their psychological well-being, they are on solid empirical ground in identifying audiences as consumers.<sup>42</sup> When Smythe insists that audiences “labor” in the economic sense, he revises traditional and critical consensus about the production process and needs further elaboration. Smythe suggests that viewers work on themselves as raw material in the process of creating consumers with interests, knowledge, and behaviors apropos to the consumer lifestyle. He is not speaking metaphorically. The more he considered audiences as commodities, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the more he struggled with the

production process. His visits to Maoist China spurred him to further consider the cultural and social development of humanity, including how humans create themselves socially and psychologically. Smythe may have begun an admirable theoretical journey, pushing socio-economic claims towards the social psychological with audiences, even individuals, self-constructing themselves through viewing activity and product cognition as an essential part of constructing collective identities as fans, consumers, or brand loyalists.

A full discussion on the labor theory of value is not in order here, but we can at least note that before Smythe commodity producers were understood to produce goods and services that have use-value with the clear intent to exchange those goods and services for profit: manufacturers produce products to sell. On the other hand, even if audiences participate in the productive process of creating consumers, audiences do not intentionally produce themselves as commodities for sale. This is not simply a question of who sells the commodity, because admittedly workers do not sell the product of their labor—that exchange transaction and the profits generated belong to the capitalist owner. Workers do sell their individual labor power, so perhaps workers could sell the labor expended in transforming themselves from citizen-viewers into consumer-audiences—but if there is no compensation or other economic consideration must we consider programming as the reward audiences receive for their labor? We have suddenly moved from the sophomoric claim that TV is “free,” to the position that TV is a form of “wage” provided to audiences that produce themselves as commodities! If labor power is exchanged for less than value it adds to the production process, providing profits to the capitalist employer whenever goods return more than the cost of production (labor and materials), what are we to make of workers (as audiences) producing a product for which they receive no compensation, have no intent in creating, and yet the product is bought and sold by others—advertisers and media producers? Additionally, what are the theoretical ramifications for class consciousness if millions of workers can collectively labor in isolation from each other? Are anticipated and recurring social contradictions which previously have spurred collective action now mitigated or superseded because the capitalist system has perfected a culture industry which has a means of profit and exploitation that circumvents solidarity and collective democratic action? Perhaps Smythe’s creative initiative has some complex and intriguing possibilities for labor theory and deserves further attention, or maybe his intellectual musings are partly the complex result of being enamored with the Chinese cultural revolution that at the time seemed to intimate some promise for a more humanist social order. In either case, as scholars, media activists, and citizens consider and reconsider historical definitions of labor and commodity, they can continue Smythe’s early assault on administrative mass communication theory with confidence.

Unfortunately, Dallas Smythe does not often appear in the pantheon of traditional U.S. media scholars - with such luminaries as Paul Lazarsfeld, Elihu Katz, Wilbur Schramm, Everett Rogers, et al, whose works better serve capitalist America. The reasons are obvious and multiple: McCarthyism, the limited publication of his work, a career lived largely in Canada, his sharp political critique of U.S. media, his public affiliation with China during the 1960s, the general emphasis on

administrative research and industrial application within U.S. media studies curricula. Certainly, Smythe did not publish as much as his ideas warranted, nor as much as might be required to provide widespread access to those ideas. Following his experience at Illinois, Smythe was painfully aware of how traditional mass communication researchers and institutions serve corporate needs administratively and ideologically. And, although there is little evidence that Smythe's research and writings were rejected by peer-reviewed journals,<sup>43</sup> the witch-hunt atmosphere of the McCarthy years muted collegial response to his ideas. The political climate of the times convinced Smythe to move to Canada in 1963 and while he taught and spoke out frequently against the stunted intellectual frames provided by Schramm, Siebert, and others, he most likely considered academic venues a secondary focus of his efforts to democratize the media. It is also clear that Smythe spent the greater part of his life on public campaigns for public media and public access, rather than scholarly endeavor. Additionally, it is possible that Smythe's public defense and admiration of the Chinese revolution influenced how he was viewed by peers and publishers. In short, whatever the myriad reasons, readily-available Smythe publications are relatively few.<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, whatever the complex of explanations for Smythe's fairly limited standing in traditional media studies, he did not rest with academic or theoretical observations of how ideologically-conditioned audiences were constructed by television programming, he constantly campaigned for structural media reform, participatory democracy, and fundamental social change.

Although Smythe noted that his political economy did not require one to be a Marxist, any continuation of his ideas would be well-advised to consider including a Marxist, class-conscious understanding of advertising, ideology, commodity production and exchange, and socio-economic class relations. The study of and challenge to contemporary media institutions and practices (e.g., satellite broadcasting, narrowcasting, web-streaming) and their relations with advertising, consumption, and government regulation may begin with Smythe, but will need to extend his early insights beyond network broadcasting. Contributions from other, more consciously Marxist scholars, including those using Gramsci's concept of hegemony, likewise have much to contribute, as they clarify the consensual, beneficial relations constructed by capitalism partially through media and cultural operations which inform, entertain, divert, and socialize whole sections of all social classes and experientially structure social relations through cultural and economic practices and actions.<sup>45</sup>

As with any good theory, Smythe's contribution provides a useful guide to action and, indeed, informed his own efforts at media reform. If one recognizes that audiences are commodities manufactured and exchanged by the commercial media industry and if one acknowledges that technology development and use is the result of class-based social relations and interests, then one must address the larger socio-economic structure to explain and transform media. An understanding of the class character of contemporary media and culture and should inform any citizen action for media democracy. Smythe had high hopes for China, but as China and the entire world moves into the capitalist orbit, Smythe's observations about audience-as-commodity, capitalist media, democracy, and citizenship must more fully inform citizen action in the United States. With such an anti-capitalist consciousness, audi-

ences cannot be reduced to commodities; they can become producers and agents in the construction of their own media, their own lives, and their own humanity.

## Notes

1. Dallas W. Smythe, "The Consumer's Stake in Radio and Television," *Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 6, no. 2 (1951): 109-128.
2. Sut Jhally, *The Spectacle of Accumulation: Essays in Media, Culture & Politics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006); Eileen Meehan, "Conceptualizing Culture as Commodity: The Problem of Television," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3, no. 4 (1986): 448-57; Eileen Meehan, "Rethinking Political Economy: Change and Continuity," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 105-16; and Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal* (London: Sage, 1996).
3. Robin Mansell encouraged a similar appreciation in her essay, "Against the Flow: The Peculiar Opportunity of Social Scientists," in *A Different Road Taken: Profiles in Critical Communication*, ed. J. A. Lent (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 43-66.
4. Dallas W. Smythe, *Counterclockwise: Perspectives on Communication*, ed. Thomas Guback (Boulder: Westview, 1994).
5. Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm, *Four Theories of the Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956).
6. For example, Robert W. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999) and Robert W. McChesney and Dan Schiller. *The Political Economy of International Communications: Foundations for the Emerging Debate about Media Ownership and Regulation, Technology, Business and Society Program Paper*, No. 11 (Geneva, Switzerland: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, 2003).
7. Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*.
8. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*, 92.
9. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*, 95, emphasis in original.
10. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*, 95.
11. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*, 96.
12. Dallas W. Smythe, *The Structure and Policy of Electronic Communication* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois, 1957), 51.
13. Smythe, "Consumer's," 111.
14. Dallas W. Smythe, "The Space Giveaway, Part 1: Who Will Own Communications Satellites?" 242-245, *The Nation*, October 14, 1961.
15. John Durham Peters and Peter Simonson, eds., *Mass Communication and American Social Thought: Key Texts 1919-1968* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 273.
16. Smythe, "Consumer's," 110.
17. For example, see Dan Schiller's "Why the World Went Mobile," *LeMonde Diplomatique*, February 2005, <http://mondediplo.com/2005/02/11telecom>

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18. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*, 249.
19. Smythe, "Consumer's," 111.
20. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*.
21. Smythe, "Consumer's," 110, emphasis in original.
22. Smythe, "Consumer's," 110.
23. Dallas W. Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1, no. 3 (1977): 1-27.
24. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*, 269.
25. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*, 270.
26. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*, 269.
27. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*, 251.
28. I leave aside here the debate over how any monitoring system can verify that audiences are actually attending to the program --broadcast or texts published. Suffice it to say, circulation figures and Nielsen and Arbitron ratings—in all their various permutations—rely primarily on reader *possession* of the media product or audience *presence* during the broadcast to infer reader and audience *attention* and *reception*. Although this frustrates them, advertisers can only purchase audience presence and hope that their creations are able to attract attention—hence the frequency, redundancy, repetition, image content, and increased volume (in sound and quantity) of ads.
29. Smythe, "Communications," 281.
30. Karen E. Riggs, "Murder, She Wrote: U.S. Mystery," Museum of Television, <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/M/htmlM/murdershew/murdershew.htm> (accessed November 14, 2006).
31. Ben H. Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly (6<sup>th</sup> Edition)* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).
32. James W. Chesebro and Dale A. Bertelsen, *Analyzing Media: Communication Technologies as Symbolic and Cognitive Systems* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996).
33. McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, 35, 58.
34. David Crouteau and William Hoynes, *The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2001).
35. Crouteau and Hoynes, 23, 24.
36. Of course, "active" audiences also provide a means for realizing profits, if they become "active" consumers and purchase goods and services.
37. Mike Budd, Steve Craig and Clay Steinman, *Consuming Environments: Television and Commercial Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 35.
38. Crouteau and Hoynes, 124.
39. Ronald V. Bettig and Jeanne Lynn Hall, *Big Media, Big Money: Cultural Texts and Political Economics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).
40. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*, 234.
41. Smythe, *Counterclockwise*, 296.
42. Budd, Clay, and Steinman, 36, 37, 98.
43. William Melody notes that Smythe did face obstacles to publishing in the U.S. during the 1950s. "Dallas Smythe: Pioneer in the Political Economy of Com-

- munications," in *Counterclockwise: Perspectives on communication*, ed. Thomas Guback (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 1-6.
44. In addition to a few essays published early in his career and those appearing in Canadian journals, Smythe published two books: *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada*, and *Counterclockwise: Perspectives on Communication*, a comprehensive collection of Smythe's essays, unpublished writings, speeches and biographical notes assembled by Thomas Guback.
45. One example of a materialist, Gramscian treatment of hegemony and media is offered by Lee Artz and Bren Murphy in *Cultural Hegemony in the United States*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 2000). Eileen Meehan expresses how to move beyond a text-based and audience-privileged cultural studies approach in her essay, "Culture: Text or Artifact or Action," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 25, No. 3 (2001): 208-217.

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