

# On Mosco Street: An Interview with Vincent Mosco

*James F. Tracy*

Vincent Mosco needs no introduction to members of the Union for Democratic Communication. For twenty-five years Mosco has been a tireless contributor to the field of critical communication studies, having authored such works as *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal* (1996), and, most recently, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (2004). Mosco is Professor of Sociology at Queen's University, Ontario, and Canada Research Chair in Communication and Society. On the day following our discussion, Professor Mosco was presented with the Dallas Smythe Award, the highest award given by the membership of the UDC. Named in the memory of Dallas Smythe, the award honors individuals who have carried on the study of the political economy of communications and struggles for democratic communications in ways that have inspired us all. In the following, Mosco recounts how his life experiences and intellectual and sociopolitical encounters throughout the latter part of the twentieth century have together informed his approach to understanding communication.

**James Tracy:** This may be one of the most impressive gatherings of the Union for Democratic Communications in some time, with Amy Goodman's address to the UDC setting the tone, and with the attendance and participation of Tariq Ali, longtime contributor and now editor of *New Left Review*, Dan Schiller, Bob McChesney, Eileen Meehan, Manju Pendakur, and yourself. You've been involved in the Union for Democratic Communications since its inception in the early 1980s. What are some of your recollections of how UDC started?

**Vincent Mosco:** Well, my first recollection is of serving as a junior professor at Georgetown University and hearing in the *Journal of Communication* of a newsletter called *Communication Perspectives* published by a group of mainly graduate students at the University of Illinois. This was around 1977-78. I began corresponding with Janet Wasko, Marty Allor, Fred Fejes, and Jennifer Slack, who along the

way decided to put on a workshop-conference in Urbana. So the first “pre-UDC” UDC Conference took place in March, 1979. I remember it vividly because it was the weekend that Three Mile Island exploded — it was hard to forget that weekend. It was there that I met Dallas Smythe, the group I just referred to, and a number of other people. Tom Guback had sort of taken the lead at Illinois. He was supervising a number of students who put on the symposium. We spent a couple of days sharing our work and our concerns about Three Mile Island. And we began to talk about the possibility of establishing an organization. We met from time to time after that meeting and two years later put on the first UDC Conference. I remember *it* vividly because my first daughter was born two days before the conference went on and I managed to do an up-and-back on a train from Washington D.C. to participate in the conference. All along I was very impressed that this was a group of very bright people doing interesting work in broadly critical communication studies and introduced me, a sociologist, not formally trained in communication studies, to a domain that I found extremely important and have stuck with for many years since.

From the 1981 conference we put on a series of what amounted to annual conferences — Washington D.C. took one under Oscar Gandy. He was a professor at Howard University at the time. It was a fascinating group of people. We had our differences of view over the balance between academic and non-academic involvements, between an emphasis on broadly political economic work and other kinds of work — cultural, labor-oriented work. But we managed to hold together. My sense is that the organization has by-and-large lived up to what we would expect it to be; a network of people who stay in touch, meet regularly at conferences, and support one another’s work.

**In two of your early works, Volume One of *The Critical Communications Review*, coedited with Janet Wasko, and in *The Pay-Per Society*, you cite an observation made by Keith Richards, longtime guitarist of The Rolling Stones. One of the reasons I bring this up is because it is both colloquial and profound. Richards remarked that he and the rest of the Stones were indignant when they found that the money they generated for Decca Records went toward**

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**the radar technology used by the United States Air Force to bomb North Vietnam. What's the significance of that insight for communication scholars?**

It certainly applies to communication scholars but more broadly to social scientists and to people who are politically engaged. It's the ability to make connections among seemingly unconnected events and forces in the world at large. It's rare for someone, certainly for someone who's lodged within the media industries — a figure like Keith Richards — to understand these connections. At the same time one is surprised that he would respond with indignance over this. After all, you would expect that he might understand that he and his work are by and large marketable commodities and that there are connections between those commodities and the broadly military-industrial system at work. But it's wonderful that you've pointed out that example because I've used it for many years in classes as a way to talk about the necessary connections between performers, stars, and the wider social power structure. It generally works well with students because they start off with an identification generally with a pop-culture figure like Richards. Many of them become indignant too when they learn about the connections. Today we would more likely make the connection between someone wearing Nike shoes and earning so much — Michael Jordan, or another pro-athlete star — who is also contributing to the power structure.

**Richards' observation suggests this notion of the intersection between history and biography brought up by C. Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination*, and I want to direct that specifically to your life and times for a moment. What's the story of Mosco Street?**

**Mosco:** (Laughs). Well, I grew up in lower Manhattan — actually on one of the main streets in Little Italy, Mulberry Street — in a tenement. We were privileged in that we did have a toilet inside the apartment, but we were six people in three rooms. No bath or shower; we went to the community center for that. We eventually moved to a place that had a fourth room, three or four blocks away at the southern tip of Mulberry Street on a street called Park Street, which was in what's called the Five Corners section of New York City — one of the more infamous neighborhoods in lower Manhattan. Celebrated for being the sort of... Well, Jacob

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Riis took most of his photographs of urban life at its most wretched in Five Corners. We lived on Park Street and my father, Frank, was a printer, a lithographer, and he was made ill by his workplace. The chemicals in the inks he worked with essentially destroyed his lungs so he was disabled at age 52.

Rather than give up he turned to become a full-time community organizer. He was a union activist and had been with the American Lithographers Association, eventually to become part of the ITU [International Typographical Union]. He was just an all-around shit disturber in lower Manhattan. One of his jobs was to fight for the preservation of the large fish market in lower Manhattan, the Fulton Fish Market, which had provided many jobs for neighborhood people. New York City wanted to move the market to another part of the city, in part to undermine the unions that were representing fish workers. The thought was that they could break the unions and, given another location in the Bronx, which is where they hoped to move it to, they could start fresh and control that important sector in the New York economy. The fish workers hired my father as consultant to fight city hall. He did that very effectively. So effectively that on the Fourth of July, 1976, the Bicentennial, he was at a fundraiser at the fish market, and gave what could only be seen as a very patriotic speech about how his parents came to America and how he was able to raise himself up by his bootstraps, and, "Shouldn't we support the opportunities that our country has provided to the fish workers at the fish market?" He was a rousing speaker and he was there to help raise some money for the cause. When he stepped down from the podium he was arrested and thrown in jail on essentially trumped up charges made to shut him up. He was accused — as many Italians are — of connections with the Mob. Nothing could be further from the truth. My father was an activist but hated the associations with the Mafia, though we all knew people well connected in that form of alternative mobility. So he was arrested and you have to imagine a man who had a hard time getting around because of his lung difficulties and disability. He was charged with four felony counts and harassed for a year until the charges were dropped. There was no case to be made but his reputation was dragged through the mud. The New York

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*Daily News* had him down as a Mafia figure. Television news reporters came up to our tenement apartment, though once they saw the conditions under which we were living they left, even though my mother offered to make them pasta. They left because they saw that there was no story here — this wasn't a rich mob figure.

In any event, when my father died a few years later it was an election year in New York City and the politicians, feeling a combination of guilt and the need to attract votes in lower Manhattan, decided to name the street that he had lived on, which was Park Street, kind of nondescript and so easily changed, to Mosco Street. The mayor and city councilors came out for the dedication and Cathy and I brought our children. In the book *The Pay-per Society*, on the dedication page, I name my children Rosie and Madeline and ask them to remember the story of Mosco Street. That is a great lesson, I think, in communication and power.

**And that experience is something that has informed your work, specifically with regard to the consideration of labor vis-à-vis communication.**

I think so. As a young boy I can remember sitting down with my dad and going over the union books, the dues books, and helping him do the math. He was a shop steward for a time and a union delegate. He impressed on me the importance of union representation and involvement in labor issues, but more broadly in community organizing. In addition to that kind of work he would be the person who would see to it that the poor in the neighborhood got their welfare checks. He would mediate their relationships with landlords. So, my interest in labor, my political commitment, was formed, I think, out of that childhood experience. But certainly it was absolutely solidified in the experience of the 1960s. I was a conscientious objector in the Vietnam War and a student activist at Georgetown University, which was a tough place to be a student activist in the sixties — a very conservative institution. But certainly the Vietnam War and the various movements associated with it, the Civil Rights movement and the like helped to strengthen my political commitment. I knew some of the major civil rights workers who came out of New York City. Mickey Schwerner, a voting rights activist who was murdered in Mississippi along with two of his associates, came from my neighborhood. So both

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my family and my community had a strong civil rights orientation. In fact, as a teenager I had the opportunity to go down to Mississippi on a voting rights campaign. My parents, however, worried that it would be far too dangerous. They supported my enthusiasm for doing it but insisted that I remain home.

**In the 1988 book, *The Political Economy of Information*, also coedited with Janet Wasko, you mention that, in the modern academy, political economy is divided into two disciplines — political science and economics. How does this separation make it difficult for these disciplines to address matters involving social power?**

Well, certainly political science is identified with government as the source of power and tends to limit itself, as most narrow disciplines do, to a focus on the mainstream. So for political science it becomes the state. To political science's credit it is concerned with power, but almost entirely as a state function. Economics doesn't care much about power. It's mainly concerned with the production, distribution, and exchange of commodities and doesn't admit to something like market power; if there is ever the acknowledgement of such power it's only regarded as an aberration. So we have a fundamental separation between power and wealth in the disciplinary structure of education and scholarship. As a result of that structure and that separation we have very little conversation between the two. My interest for many years has been to bring those two different voices together and bring them back to their roots in political economy which in many respects was the form of knowledge that ... I hesitate to use the term discipline because political economists wouldn't see themselves as part of a separate discipline. Political economy was a way of knowing and a body of knowledge. My hope has been to bring these divided disciplines together and connect them — reconnect them — to their roots in political economy. It's very difficult but we were there once and I think that the growth of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity raises real hopes for the kinds of recombinations and return to roots that might enable us to reestablish the political economy tradition.

**How might the political economy of communication become a more prominent subdiscipline of communication**

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**and media studies in North America and Europe than it presently is?**

I think we've made some progress. I've seen more and more universities at least feel the need to have *someone* around who does political economy, however defined, and that certainly was not the case when I first encountered communication studies. So there's been some progress, though certainly not enough. There's lots more work to be done. I'm encouraged by the way reality is forcing itself on disciplines like communication studies. So in a sense the world is crying out for political economy and, however reluctantly, I think communication studies will address it. One of the ways in which it will become a more prominent subdiscipline is simply by virtue of the forces at work in society at large and the recognition among the people who have had a commitment to political economy to continue to build on that. Organizations like the UDC have greatly helped that. As I've discussed in *The Political Economy of Communication* (1996) that field was a very lonely one in the 1950s and 1960s with a handful of isolated individuals like Dallas Smythe and Herb Schiller and later Tom Guback who worked as individuals adopting a perspective that had *no* representation within the discipline or its wider associations. And I think that's changed.

**You mention *The Political Economy of Communication*, and in that book you propose specific epistemological and ontological orientations toward a rethinking and renewal of political economy. One where there is room for grasping the ubiquity and perpetual nature of social change. Can you provide us with an overview of the framework you propose in that book?**

Yes, and I want to put it simply. Questions that are broad and all-encompassing philosophically, as matters of epistemology and ontology are, can be grounded in simple matters of intellectual temperament. When given the choice between either/or, my leaning is to choose both; to understand that reality is mutually constituted, for example, out of language and labor. The epistemological stance I take is one grounded in mutual constitution in multiple determination or the recognition that the forces at work in social, cultural, political, and economic space work on one another. At the same time they form a fundamental reality — yes, there is

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a reality. We ought not to have to emphasize that but given developments in philosophy and related fields, taking on the position of a realist — perhaps a critical realist — is one that you have to both assert and explain. It is my view that there is a grounding reality and it is related to an ontological position that privileges change, process, and becoming over stasis, being, and structure. Now, these are choices that one makes as an intellectual. They're not ones that one just makes arguments for but they become really fundamental standpoints or intellectual coordinates — and they are mine. Again, a position that appreciates the ontological choice of both, or the general mutual constitution of forces in social space, recognizes the ability of people to make other kinds of choices or insertions into the social whole. This is my choice and I choose it because it offers, I think, great advantages in building a political economy that is comprehensive, open, and generous to the range of ways of looking at the world.

**In the present arrangement of social relations in capitalism, almost everything is driven by this process you term commodification — drawing on Marx. How does this play out alongside processes of spatialization and structuration?**

An epistemological position that is broadly generous and which eschews essentialisms of all sorts suggests that there is no singular reality to which all things can be reduced (that is fundamentally essentialist) argues for real starting points, or entry points, into a social totality, but at the same time recognizes that reality cannot be reduced to a particular starting point. I start with commodification — the process of transforming use to exchange value — and carry that through to an understanding of commodities of all sorts in the communication domain; the commodification of content, of audiences, and of *labor*. But, again, it recognizes that we can't reduce reality to processes of commodification, and I offer a couple of other vectors, or points that build upon commodification, that help us more broadly comprehend the social totality. Spatialization is one of these and structuration is another. Spatialization builds broadly on work on organizational structure and process and on geography. Structuration builds on work in sociology. So whereas commodification focuses on the transformation of use to exchange value in various forms, spatialization

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looks at extension — both institutional and geographic — that is, the ways in which organizations occupy space and form networks of relationships, and the ways in which those networks of relationships are positioned in real and imagined geographies. Now certainly, commodification and spatialization are mutually constituted and one fruitful area of research that I've pursued, to some degree, is to look at the ways in which they are bound up: for example, in the ways in which spaces are turned into commodities. There's the transformation of public spaces into marketable commodities and the dialectical process of resisting that transformative process, which is brought out by social movements or the contradictions inherent in the commercialization of public space. Structuration enables one to look at the fundamental relationship between structure and agency. That is how people make history even when they are operating under conditions that are not necessarily of their own making. Structuration looks at the processes more broadly of class formation, gender formation, and race relations. One can look at other ways of framing beyond class, race, and gender, but overall these are ways of bringing the sociological understanding of power into what amounts to a rethought and broadly envisioned idea of political economy.

**From *Pushbutton Fantasies* to *The Digital Sublime* there is in fact a consistent theme throughout your work of collectively held notions and beliefs and their power to influence the material realm. Are there conceptual linkages and perhaps underlying socioeconomic political bearings between theories of postindustrial society and postmodernism that emerged in the 1980s, and the myths surrounding information technology or “cyberspace”?**

Though I articulated the relationship between the broadly material realm and the broadly understood realm of value, belief / ideology — I don't necessarily like the term material realm because beliefs are material as well. Though I articulated the relationship in a systematic way in *The Political Economy of Communication* I think I've always understood something about or had a feeling for the mutual constitution of language and labor — or, put another way, belief, and material experience and encounter. I think this grows out of life experience and the recognition that, as a poor, working class kid growing up in New York City at

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the dawn of, as it were, the Television Age, one understood *fully* the power of both material need and the power of ideas and values. The worry that we wouldn't be able to pay the monthly rent was the material pressure and the stories coming out of that new box, however fuzzy and black and white in the living room, the power of the stories coming from it — emanating from it — I think created a deep sense of the relationship of language and material experience. And so I've always felt that those were equally vital elements of life, so I've never felt myself to be a simple materialist, or someone who believes simply in the power of ideas, but that it was central to understand *both* and to understand their relationship. Of course, I didn't understand this in great depth until I discovered Marx as an undergraduate student at Georgetown University, working with intellectual historian and Islamic scholar Hisham Sharabi, who introduced me to *The German Ideology*, which I thought was one of the most profound works I had ever encountered and helped me to understand a great deal about the first nineteen or twenty years of my life. Moving on from there to graduate work at Harvard I think helped to reinforce that view.

There wasn't much of Marx taught at Harvard, though I did take a course on Marxism from Daniel Bell but it was mainly an attack on Marx and everything about him, though thoughtfully rendered. Bell was brilliant and a serious lecturer but resented, I think, what Marx had done to his life. It was in an atmosphere in the 1970s filled with graduate students who were keenly eager to pursue a Marxian analysis of society, so I had the benefit of being a student with people like Theda Skocpol, for example, who would go on to become one of our best political sociologists, and a number of others. So at the level of understanding the Marxian side of the equation I had the benefit of some very bright fellow graduate students and, on the other side, the benefit of working with people like Bell, and Talcott Parsons, who focused on the belief-value and more broadly ideological side of understanding society. From that time on I've struggled with the relationships between them — between the broadly ideational and material realms.

What we see today in debates about the relationship of postindustrialism to postmodernism comes as nothing new. From my understanding they are in many respects

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reinventions of an old wheel. That is, they are attempts to conceptualize, to understand, to critique the relationship between the broadly material and the broadly cultural and evaluative, but they have their own specificity and certainly the notions of post anything — postindustrial or postmodern — suggest an uncertainty that I think is very specific here: that indeed there is enough uncertainty about our time that it makes it difficult for us to think about — to name anything new — the material or ideological domain we've entered, so we preface an old name with “post” in the hopes of suggesting that something has changed but we are not terribly certain about what it is. Now I generally support the humility that is contained in these terms in the sense there is uncertainty.

What is striking to me and what animates *The Digital Sublime* is the view that in other quarters there is far less humility. My sense is that cyberspace has become the repository of grand narrative and grand myth. While it is true that we tell stories whenever we invent technologies — that we mythologize, whether it's about the telegraph or electricity — there is something certainly different about each one, but more fundamentally different about cyberspace. In the book I describe the connections between myths of cyberspace and broader myths that are fundamental and transformative; myths about the end of history, the end of geography, and the end of politics. That is, myths that announce a fundamental break in time, space, and social relations that has come from cyberspace are enormously compelling stories, enormously evocative, that approach the sublime — a term that Edmund Burke described well 250 years ago when he distinguished in his essay [*Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*] the sublime from the beautiful.

The beautiful is that which we want to be identified with or associated with, what we love and are attracted to. The sublime is something that is beyond language, that is awesome, that is transcendent, that is both desired and feared. Cyberspace, in spite of the dot-com bust, and even in the face of being dragged down to earth in the utter banality of the day-to-day world of cyberspace, is still rendered mythological and very powerfully so. When Nicholas Negroponte says, “The world of atoms is ending; we must

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learn to be digital," this is profound. When Ray Kurzweil says that we have been dependent for all too long on limitations of our physical hardware, i.e. our bodies, and that in the future we will render our spirit and our soul in software so that we will achieve immortality — *this* from someone who carries the ballast of strong technological credentials (he's produced some of the fundamental technologies that have helped the blind to read) — is very, very powerful and we've experienced this across the debates about history, geography, and politics.

So, just to offer one more example, and a very powerful one, I think, that embodies the end of politics, which I describe at some length in the book, is the belief — deeply religious, deeply sublime, deeply linked to cyberspace — that we can produce a defense against nuclear weapons, the "star wars" or strategic defense system. The ballistic missile defense system is the embodiment of an end of politics mentality. By drawing on technology, especially computer technology, we can lift a security umbrella around at least the United States, if not the world, that will provide the type of womb-like cocoon that will end politics because it will no longer require the face-to-face, day-to-day, dirty, messy, complex world that we call the political. So that when Ronald Reagan told Gorbachev with regard to the ballistic missile defense system that he saw the hand of providence in it, Reagan was tapping something deeply religious, deeply mythical, spiritual, and protective in this system. It's full of the end of politics. And the book, perhaps drawing on a career-long view that politics and values are mutually constituted, material life and beliefs are mutually constituted, recognizes the *force* of myth. *Myths matter*. They are not simply ideological embodiments of material practices. They are *real*, they are *lived*, and they have consequences in mutual constitution with political life. So as I describe it, *The Political Economy of Communication* was an attempt to start with political economy and material life and build a bridge to the cultural domain. *The Digital Sublime* reverses this and begins with culture, chooses myth as its starting point, and in the concluding chapter, "From Ground Zero to Cyberspace and Back Again," I return to political economy, and hope in the encounter to enrich them both.

**In the late 1990s you began a project addressing the rise of high technology districts in four major**

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**cities to consider the question of public space. When you discussed this at the 1999 UDC meeting at the University of Oregon you referenced the graphic on the cover of Herbert Schiller's 1989 book, *Culture Inc.*, which is captioned, "Public Space, Owned and Maintained by AT&T, 550 Madison Avenue, New York City." What's the relationship between the concept behind this representation on *Culture Inc.* and your work on metropolitan space?**

One of the great errors in understanding the work of Herbert Schiller is to see him as simply a political economist who would understand the material world as ultimately determining everything else. Herb, I think, at quite a deep level, comprehended the mutual constitution of culture and politics, and in *Culture Inc.* he addresses this in some very interesting ways, one of which is to embody the cultural transformation of specific places in material practices, including, in his book, the AT&T Building in New York City. The building is certainly bound up in political economy because AT&T used its political clout when it proposed to break the zoning height limits and promise in return a public space at its base. To AT&T's credit, and perhaps to the negotiating skills of the City of New York at the time, it was able to create an open space at the base, certainly owned and managed, as Herb suggests, by AT&T.

I went back to that space as part of my Cities project and looked at the new AT&T Building (now owned and operated by Sony) as evidence of the growing ferocity of the commercialization of public space. Sony didn't just buy the building from AT&T, it enclosed the open space at the base but continued to fly flags that announced that this was public space now owned and maintained by Sony. Part of my research was to do an ethnography on the spot. That is, to go into the public space and observe how people acted there and how Sony reconstituted it. I noticed that — and I'm being very specific here because I think specificity does matter — now that the space is enclosed there are tables across the space where people can sit. But on each table is a card that announces all of the things one cannot do in Sony's public space — what is forbidden — including the carrying of large packages. This is code for keeping the homeless out of Sony Plaza, a way to control what is considered public space. So Sony transformed an already transformed public

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space, commercializing it, and making use of it for its own ends. But there is great irony in all of this. One of the other pieces of the ethnography was observing a coffee shop in Sony Plaza that called itself “Café Society” — just a place to go in and buy expensive coffee — but there was a sign above the bar that could have been written by Jürgen Habermas, which described the history of public space and talked about how in café society two hundred years ago people gathered to debate the issues of the day and in shops like this people could once again gather, provided that they followed all of Sony Plaza’s rules. It is one thing to understand political economy as a broad form of knowing the world. It is another to apply a rethought political economy to the specificity of daily life in transformed cities as well as other spaces, and my interest in New York, as it was in Malaysia, was to understand the ways in which public life, commercial-commodification imperatives, new technologies, and new media were interacting to reconstitute spaces, in a sense to explore more fully and in greater specificity the meaning of spatialization in a commodified world.

**A more recent phenomenon of the heightened globalization of capitalism and the struggle between public and private realms is the free trade agreement, for example, the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement of 1989, the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1993, and the more recently proposed Global Agreement on Trade in Services and the Free Trade Area of the Americas. What do communication scholars have to contribute to a widened understanding of these geopolitical developments?**

Well, I think putting it most directly and most simply, these agreements are part of the global debate about communication, information, and media. Broadly, the agreements break new ground in understanding new forms of the commodity, whether these are television programs, software products, or telephone calls. The agreements are in many respects extensions — deepenings and extensions — of capitalist development worldwide, so are in essence linked to processes that have been at work for, now, 300 years, but they also mark a break from those processes in the sense that they take on a new commodity terrain — the commodities that grow out of digitization — and are an attempt, in a sense, to reconfigure and reconstitute political

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space nationally, continentally, and globally, because these are all part of the process understood under the GATT and the World Trade Organization, to free capital to pursue the broadly understood informational commodity. So they are both new in the sense that they deal with new forms of the commodity but old in that they are deepening and extensions of capitalist processes. Communication scholars are well positioned to understand these agreements provided that they situate the agreements and their knowledge in a broader political economic understanding because communication scholars are expert at the technical, social, and cultural dimensions of this new host of commodities; broadly, informational, communicational, and cultural.

**Finally, the world is facing a very overt form of American military imperialism, so evident in the events taking place in Iraq today and over the past year. The theme and title of this year's UDC meeting is "The Axis of Empire," and, in fact, your address is titled "Empire at Ground Zero." What is the task of the critical communication scholar and activist in the present historical moment and era?**

Well, the task is the task that it's been for many, many years: To understand imperialism, to critique it, and to confront it and to use that understanding, that critique, and that confrontation to overturn it. The moment is perhaps a more intense one, though I think one can argue that the postwar era — post World War Two era — has been marked by spasms of imperial intensity, from the height of the Cold War on through to the various stress points we have encountered in the last fifty or so years. Personally, I can recall the fear of a "Duck and Cover" drill in the heart of Manhattan at age six; of going to a high school class one day during the Cuban missile crisis, expecting that we might not live out the day; of confronting a draft board having just received an admission letter to Harvard to do graduate work, and the expectation that I could be jailed for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War, and the hope that they would grant me the status of a conscientious objector. I could go on. The issues have been with us over the last five decades and they are more intense perhaps today — we may be in the midst of another one of those spasms — but they are not entirely new and nor is the task of the critical scholar. We must confront it and we must resist.

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## **The Washington Consensus and the Axis of Empire: Tariq Ali's Address to the UDC Conference, St. Louis 2004**

*One of the highlights of the 2004 UDC Conference, in keeping with its theme, The Axis of Empire, was Tariq Ali's talk to the general body. Ali, who was born in colonial India and actively resisted the war against Vietnam, spoke to us about the contemporary adventures of the U.S. Empire and its junior allies. Since Ali spoke without a written text what we have here is a transcription of his speech prepared by Jim Hale with editorial changes made by the editors of this issue.*

What has happened to media globally today is that it has come under the rules of Washington Consensus. Once it was determined how capitalism was going to function after the defeat of a big enemy that had called itself communism, media too were redirected — not necessarily, on a one-to-one basis — but sooner or later, both in the U.S. and elsewhere, in Europe as well, by the Washington Consensus.

Compare, for instance, media coverage in the 1970s and 1980s in terms of detailed news stories they carried on international events. After the Washington Consensus there has been a sharp decline in both the coverage of world politics and the numbers of foreign correspondents. There have been international crises after 9/11 without people to report on them. The problem was how to report a world where they had nobody to cover it.

This was deliberate — the ruling media had decided after the Cold War that we now lived in world where there would be no more conflicts. They had decided we did not need to educate a population to the same extent as had been necessary at the height of the Cold War. The Cold War had created an enemy, an enemy that challenged the functioning of capitalism itself; so we had to keep print and electronic media at certain level. For example, East Germans watching West German television could see diversity and debate. Then arguments had to be made to explain why the Cold War was being fought. Now, hot war arguments have to be found to convince people to support the new wars.

Of course, most journalists have never been permitted to cover what they wanted. But many decided to go their own way and report what they wanted to report. Saigon in Vietnam is an example. David Halberstam and Morley Safer are examples of some of those who broke the news management that was being imposed on them. They gave a different, more truthful picture. But that is now distant and remote. It is now discussed as history.

After the first Gulf War they tried to control television coverage, how war would be reported, and you had little coverage of the Turkey Shoot, the massacre of a retreating army. Some photographs got out, brave individuals went in. But news management was successful. This gave confidence to those who were in control. The same thing happened in the Balkan wars: images were used to whip up fervor, to get populations to accept the war. The number of Kosovans killed, in clashes between armed guerillas and the Yugoslav army prior to the NATO intervention, was less than 1,500. Instead, the figure we were told was 10,000. Based on this falsification, the decision was made that we had to go in and intervene. Once this began, the Milosevic regime acted the only way it did and began to drive people out. Images were edited and made to resemble images of the Second World War, of Jews being taken to concentration camps.

This imagery has played a big part in the mythology of wars following World War II. Egypt 1956 was the last war the British fought without American backing. They portrayed Prime Minister Abdul Nasser as "Hitler on the Nile," which is why they had to crush him. But this spelled the end of an independent Britain. Nassar was the most popular nationalist leader produced on the Nile, but the image that was transmitted was that fascism had taken over Egypt. They decided to pick a fight with him and take his country.

In the First Gulf War, they turned Saddam Hussein into a "Hitler on the Tigris." The same was true of "Milosevic on the Danube." In every one of these instances of news management, the images used were very similar. It's a sad business, indeed. We imagine the war was fought to save the Jews in Hitler's Germany, but that was far from the truth. If this was really the case, then WWII was a defeat. In reality, the Allies, despite repeated requests, refused to bomb the camps although they didn't make it difficult to bomb the camps

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either. While the inmates of those camps would have been killed in the bombings it would have also become difficult to continue to use those camps. Instead, the allies made the argument that they didn't have planes to spare. So it became a war to defeat German/Italian fascism rather than save the Jews. Idiots said this about Osama Bin Laden — a man with 2000 or 3000 people and no state power, whatsoever: that he was the leader of a global Islamo-fascist threat. The image stuck in the consciousness of United States and Britain.

This constant use of media, since the end of the Cold War, to whip up populations is very dangerous. The only way to combat it is by showing counter images, even on the web. Sometimes that has a much, much bigger effect. That's the hopeful side of this. It is difficult for them to totally ignore what Indy media do. They could sometimes get away with this in the 1970s, 1980s and even in the 1990s.

When we took Baghdad, shameless news managers listened to house-Arabs in Washington who said that we would be greeted with sweets and flowers. There were no sweets, no flowers. No people to greet them. This stunned them. They couldn't use mass mobilization to recreate a new image of a Berlin Wall of Middle East. There was no one to tear down statues. So they rapidly assembled machinery and mercenaries to do the job. Saddam was not popular but occupation by foreigners was even less popular. Basically, the entire event of tearing down the statue was manufactured by Chalabi's people and Marine heavy equipment. Two hundred people pretended to be two million. It was pathetic. It was pathetic in a city of two million. Yet, this was the image that went around the world.

Mercifully, independent journalists took photos of the large square, a square that was mostly empty, and, as they couldn't have done 25 years ago, put the images on the Internet and around the world. Activists begin to challenge what was going in Iraq. This big challenge completely skewered media attempts to justify this war. We tend to give too much weight to official media and too little to public opinion, which often sees through the lies imposed on them by politicians and backed by the media. So, they rebel, an instinctive rebellion against the lies of the politicians and the media barons. And they tried to stop a war from taking place. We had massive demonstrations on Feb. 15, 2003,

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without media support. After it happened, it got reported on the media. Such protests have never happened on this scale, at any time on the globe.

The British government, the prime minister, asked the director general of BBC why he continued reporting this. His question was, "How do you know there are a million people protesting?" But the figures were police figures. "One million," the BBC replied. "Should we now challenge the police figures?" I was on a BBC program and talked about this exchange between Downing Street and BBC. I said there were lots of people who opposed this war. But the government had supplied its own people for the program. Audiences were seen as too radical! I was on another panel before the war — you could tell that it was a weird audience, 25 percent were brought in purposely, including Chalabi's nephew. It was noticeable what had happened. There were others now on the payroll of the West.

The size and scale of these anti-war demonstrations, these first mass revolts *against media news management and media lies* as well as against the war was remarkable. This protest was not just against politicians. People didn't believe the pack of lies about the threat of mass destruction and a collapsing regime. We knew instinctively that it was just a pack of lies. Ours was also a rebellion against *untruth*.

This shook senior people in Europe. There were switches in Britain, with two mainstream papers coming out against the war. *The Daily Mirror* started to look like an anti-war newspaper. Of its three million readers, between 40 and 50 percent were against the war and the press realized it. In one issue there was a big picture of Blair and Bush naked. The caption said, "Make Love, Not War."

Why did this happen? Let's go back one step further. In Europe, senior people in the ruling elite were divided on war. When you have division on that level and to that degree, it becomes impossible for media, which have to serve the interests of the entire elite, to be single-minded in their devotion to government of the day.

One of the most senior figures in British intelligence, Blair's national security advisor, wrote to the *London Financial Times* and denounced the government. He charged it with lying and attempting to scare the country. He wrote that housewives were encouraged to stock up and

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that tanks were sent to Heathrow Airport to create war-hysteria. We knew this was fake. I was told by a policeman that these were 9-to-5 tanks — “they don’t pay overtime after 5,” said the policeman. This type of letter is unheard of in British society. A senior figure in British intelligence wrote, “warmongers sell war. Fishmongers sell fish. Our prime minister has somewhat oversold his wares.” Other senior figures said they didn’t think we’re ready to go to war, that this was one war that went too far. The lies weren’t having the desired effect.

The knowledge of this conflict created a division in the heart of the media establishment. The BBC could not be as loyal as it usually is. Previously, it used to be difficult to get dissident voices on BBC. Now, we could get in dissident voices at certain times. BBC World used to get me on in the morning. They would not have me on at 3 to 4 in the afternoon — because America’s woken up by then, I was told. That’s how carefully they plan it. They didn’t want too many radical voices to wreck our standing in the U.S.

The Iraq war has caused massive problems for the ruling class because the reality is totally different from that told by news managers in Washington and London. It is a tribute to Iraqi resistance that they helped the truth come out. If there had been no resistance in Iraq, the whole business would have been treated as an incredible triumph. Even Europeans would have clamored on board to share the loot. In fact, that’s exactly what they said at first: Please let us share the loot. Now, they’ve gone silent. It was quite a step in Spain, to pull their troops out of Iraq, making the U.S. establishment livid.

The media cannot *not* report but they report events in a particular way. It is taken for granted in the U.S., not in Europe, that targeting individuals and killing them is justified. It’s shocking what makes this acceptable in regard to U.S. policy in the Middle East: there is absolutely no opposition at the official political level on Iraq and Palestine. There is nothing to choose between Bush and Kerry. Kerry is to the right of Bush on Palestine. This collusion makes it easier for mainstream media to justify bombing Fallujah, to shock and punish civilian populations. No matter, that this is exactly what the Germans did in WWII. But there was no shock or horror in the U.S. media.

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The U.S. is on a different planet, altogether. There is no serious criticism of what is happening in Palestine. The Israeli army is targeting young children under 17. The Israeli army is well trained. The number of young boys targeted has reached astronomic proportions. Yet, this is acceptable. The Western liberal conscience is dead as far as Palestine is concerned. The reason given for its acceptance is Judaicide. So the Palestinians are indirect victims of WWII Judaicide, which was done in the name of Christianity by a regime that flaunted its Christianity. Hitler had a great deal about divine wrath and God in him.

When you compare the coverage of Palestine in the U.S. and Israel media, there is much more critical coverage in some sections of the Israeli press than in the U.S. The question is asked by the Israeli press, "Can't you just print some sections of this in the *New York Times*?" The answer, no we can't. Some courageous pilots refused to bomb Palestinians. They said that they were not the mafia and would not carry out revenge killings. It was published here in the U.S., but only in a small fashion. A very brave Israeli journalist wrote a "Defense of Israel" and the government reaction was interesting. He had taken every single paragraph and statement from Hitler's writings and signed it, A. Schickelgrueber. They didn't realize this was Hitler's real name. Probably thought it was some nice Jewish boy. He lost his job, but his piece was syndicated in many magazines and newspapers.

Subversive acts can and do have an impact. Dissident Israelis have far more courage than that displayed by their equivalents, certainly the liberals, in the U.S. These people are incredibly high-minded, but with all these brutalities, they give a nod and a wink to what they know about Hussein and Milosevic. It's a totally different story when it comes to Israeli actions against Palestinians. I feel, this is something the Independent media network has to do: to let the Israeli dissidents speak, to get stuff regularly from dissident Israeli groups, and to publicize it here.

Meanwhile, news management has become an art form. Watching Fox television is a rare experience, an anthropological experience like nothing else in the Western world. Third Reich television would have been more

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intelligent. Yet, they can get away with it because they have the money.

But the power of corporations can be challenged by producing counter programs. Sometimes lies become so big, people even pour out into the streets against those lies. The large anti-war demonstrations were not just a triumph of the left. Millions from every walk of life, of many different political opinions came out as citizens. If three million leftists had poured into the streets of Rome we would have been close to an insurrection! They came out as citizens speaking against a war that had been based on total lies. Their protest forced the media to stand back in Europe. In the U.S., resistance has caused a few newspapers to stand back and ask a few questions. These reports are beginning to come out.

Once the lies of officialdom are broken you begin to see that things are not going so well for the establishment. Without the resistance, you wouldn't have had these books from within the administration — Clark's book, or even that wretch Bob Woodward's. They are producing these books because it is not going well. They want to say, "We told you so."

I had said before the war — this is an Arab country and it has had an awful leadership. But once you occupy the country they will resist because they will not like losing their independence. The occupying soldiers are demoralized. They did not find any weapons of mass destruction. Capturing Saddam didn't stop the resistance. It only increased it, as I had predicted. Now that they got rid of this son-of-a-bitch they can drive the Americans out. Then, they tried to sell the story that the resistance was nothing but the Al Queda. If the Al Queda were there at all, they were there because the occupation had drawn them there like a magnet. They had never been there before. Iraq was a country in which more women were educated as doctors, teachers, and airline pilots.

Resistance is always fought by a minority. When at the beginning of any resistance has it not been a minority? Nearly 50 percent of the French had cooperated happily in WWII. The U.S. recognized the Vichy regime until 1944. That argument, that the Iraqi resistance is only a minority, just doesn't work. We have to keep in touch with history.

It was said of the Shi'ite uprising that the Shias were

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the only ones resisting. Sunni/Shiite divisions exist, but the Sunni triangle is a western invention. Iraq is an integrated society. The other big lie is that power is being handed over to the Iraqis. The U.S takes a handful of Iraqis from here, most of them are from the U.S. anyway, and it's not going to work. Well, they say, we won't hand them full sovereignty. The resistance is going to go on. The media is going to be tested.

Words like resistance, empire, imperialism are being discussed not only on the left but also on the right. We're seeing a twenty-first century colonization of a country. This is a lesson of history. Contrary to the denunciations of dominant narratives by postmodern academics there is a dominant narrative in history — the triumph of capitalism, of the neo-liberal steamroller, of the Washington consensus, and the American empire. Find me a narrative to compete with that. Many in the academy ran from that — because it's threatening.

But history has come up again.

Understand Iraq in its history. It was once dominated by the British Empire and there were those who fought against that. Now those very grandparents are telling their grandchildren how to fight the U.S. Iraq has not lost its history. This is a country that has a living memory.

Many in the U.S. cannot believe that this could happen again. This country is full of those who were dissident in the '60s and '70s and have now made their peace with establishment. Yet, a new generation is being radicalized in a different way, in a different time. We need to put our hopes on this generation — it's hardheaded and cynical, not like those under Reagan and Thatcher. The day Baghdad was being bombed, hundreds, thousands of school kids poured out to protest. Radicals in a generation are not a majority. They never are. This generation's radicals are out there. They have many technological and political opportunities.

If only, we had only had the web in 1960s and 1970s. What miracles we could have achieved! Radical websites are now deluged from all over the world. When a war erupts three or four radical websites are deluged, from all over the world, because no one believes the official truth, and this is incredibly positive.

And, on that happy note I will stop.

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