



TEACHING AND LEARNING COMMUNICATION FOR DEVELOPMENT

A perspective from Canada

Helen Hambly Odame



When the television-viewing public in Canada finally decided who qualified as the “Greatest Canadian” they picked a man whose name is unknown outside of Canada. Unlike Winston Churchill or Ronald Reagan who topped the British and American lists respectively, Tommy Douglas was our national hero. Once considered a radical socialist, Douglas not only promoted but realized our most important social services in Canada including universal health care, pensions for senior citizens and mothers’ allowances. During an era preoccupied with the Soviet Union/USA struggle, Douglas also urged Canada to promote human rights and anti-war interventions globally. From the 1940s through to his death in 1986 his work was political as well as imminently practical. Canada, Tommy Douglas explained, had to be based on principles of civil liberty for all with an appreciation of its heritage of multiculturalism.

Today, many Canadians hold an altruistic but also a self-depreciating belief that Canada is dissimilar to its powerful neighbour to the South, the United States of America. Canadians may bristle when referred to as “Americans” even when the adjective “Northern” is implied. We do have a different agenda for development in our nation because of the policies that people like Tommy Douglas promoted. Still, Canadians struggle with difficult social challenges in our local communities, and we struggle to keep a position in these debates internationally. Intrinsic to these efforts is communication for social and environmental change.

The facts are clear but not often enough acknowledged. Canada has a child poverty rate of 15 percent which is three times higher than the rates of Sweden, Norway or Finland and every six weeks one million people in Canada receive food aid from warehouses of donated canned food and goods or “food banks”. Our social justice issues in aboriginal, inner-city, rural and remote communities are serious. We face tremendous ecological problems in a land rich in fresh water, forests and mineral resources. Regardless of being labeled a well-off nation that ranked fourth in the 2004 United Nations Human Development Index Canadians face significant communication challenges concerning poverty, inequity and

ISSUE 3
February 2006

environmental crises hidden by such global indices.

The history of Canadian engagement with issues of communication and media for social change is strong. Canadians Harold Innis (*The Bias of Communication*, 1951) and Marshall McLuhan (*Understanding Media*, 1964) and Dallas Smythe (*Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*, 1981) were some of the major contributors to Canadian literature and contributions to communication studies in of what McLuhan called the “global village”. This legacy is furthered by the outstanding contributions of public institutions such as the National Film Board of Canada. As Box 1 indicates, there is a wide range of non-profit organizations in Canada, many with an international mission, involved with media and communication for social change and development.

Our Canadian universities study and teach a vast range of studies in media and communication. The programs are listed in the on-line database provided by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada [1]. The definition of ‘communication’ employed by these programs is a broad conceptualization and includes the study of messages, mediums, and audience. Programs vary in their attention to communication as a ‘process’ and communications as ‘products’. The weight attributed to coursework in mass communication and digital technologies may also vary.

Overall, in Canada, there are in total more than seven PhD programs in communication studies including two French-speaking programs. There are ten Masters level programs in communication studies which may or may not include a thesis research option. In addition, there are programs in closely related fields such as the University of Guelph’s Masters of Science in Rural Extension Studies which includes research-oriented coursework in capacity development and adult learning. On-line learning opportunities are available primarily in the form of on-line Graduate Diploma programs. There are eleven co-operative studies programs in communication at the undergraduate level which offer students opportunities to combine work and study in the field of communication and media. Finally, there are nearly 100 undergraduate programs in communication studies in Canada, many of which offer joint programs in areas such as journalism, visual and theatre arts. This is a remarkable range and number of academic programs in communication studies for a nation of 32.5 million people.

One initiative in the study of communication process in Canada is to cross the disciplinary boundaries of social sciences and apply this work in fields such as agriculture and environmental sciences. In this respect the study of communication becomes relevant to a larger number of students from other degree or diploma programs. At the University of Guelph we converge the study of communication for social change with agricultural extension and rural development. We are then able to challenge a premise that media and communication studies have an urban-centric perspective without sufficient application in more remote and rural areas of the world.

Diversity is interpreted not only in terms of cross-cultural and intercultural communication, but also in the culture of 'place' [2]. Our faculty and student research projects embrace topics such as communication process in the context of agricultural crises, access and use of broadband in northern, First Nations communities, strengthening links between agricultural research stations and radio stations in Africa and gender and agriculture in the information society.

In the future, our work is to be increasingly relevant to the Canadian as well as the global scholarship. We will do so by acknowledging our difference as Canadians, and studying 'communication for development' in our local context as well as in the rest of the so-called 'developing nations'.

A SELECTION OF ORGANIZATIONS BASED IN CANADA INVOLVED WITH COMMUNICATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT

- Center des médias alternatifs du Québec: <http://www.cmaq.net/fr/>
- The Snowden Program: <http://www.uoguelph.ca/snowden/>
- International Development Research Centre (Communication and ICTs Program): <http://www.idrc.ca>
- Alternatives, Action and Communication Network for International Development: <http://www.alternatives.ca/en>
- IMPACS (Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society): <http://www.impacs.org/>
- Developing Countries Farm Radio Network: <http://www.farmradio.org/>
- The Jesuit Communication Project: <http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/JCP/>
- Rabble Podcast Network: <http://www.rabble.ca/>
- K-NET: <http://www.knet.ca/>
- National Film Board of Canada: <http://www.nfb.ca/>
- Media Awareness Network: <http://www.media-awareness.ca/>
- Ryakuga Grassroots Communication: <http://www.ryakuga.org/ryakuga/index.html>
- Journalists for Human Rights: <http://www.jhr.ca/>
- Commonwealth of Learning: <http://www.col.org/>

- The Communication Initiative: <http://www.comminit.com/>
- AMARC (World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters): <http://www.amarc.org/>
- PANOS Canada: <http://www.panoscanada.ca/>

References

Babe, Robert E. 2000. *Canadian Communication Thought: Ten Foundational Writers*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press

Innis, Harold Adams. *The Bias of Communication*. 1951. Intro. Marshall McLuhan. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964.

McLuhan, M. (1962). *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. See also <http://www.marshallmcluhan.com> and <http://www.mcluhan.utoronto.ca>

Smythe, Dallas. 1981. *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Helen Hambly Odame holds a PhD from the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University in Toronto. She joined the faculty of Capacity Development and Extension in the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development at the University of Guelph in 2003. Previously, Helen spent 14 years in international research and development work in Canada, the Netherlands and throughout sub-Saharan Africa. She coordinates the Snowden Program in Development Communication based at the University of Guelph, Canada. hhambly@uoguelph.ca A

[1] Search the AUCC database at: <http://oraweb.aucc.ca/showdcu.html>
 [2] For instance, one of the cases that I often draw upon in my teaching comes from the late 1960's in a place called Fogo Island located off Canada's eastern coast. An unprecedented partnership between the Extension Department of Memorial University in Newfoundland, and the National Film Board of Canada, this is a seminal participatory communication initiative with the communities of Fogo Island, Newfoundland (see the article by Paul MacLeod in this issue). The 'Fogo Process' as it came to be known was based on a deeply held conviction that 'empowerment is at the core of development and communication is the engine for empowerment'.

SUBMITTED BY: FLORENCIA ENGHEL

2006-01-29

