The Television Audience

Watching as Working: The Valorization of Audience Consciousness

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An exploration of the argument that TV exemplifies the production and reflection of surplus value and that watching, as an activity, reflects the organization of human labor in the economy as a whole.

Does the audience "work" at watching television? Is the notion a real economic process, or does it serve as a metaphor? Our short answer is: It is both. It is a metaphor *because* it is a real economic process, specific to the commercial media, that produces value. How this process occurs is the argument of our article.

The metaphorical power of "watching as working" arises from the particular relationship of the media and the economy as a whole. In the media, the whole economy exists as an image, an object of watching—more precisely, an object of the *activity* of watching. At the same time, the media exist as a reflection of the whole economy of which they are a

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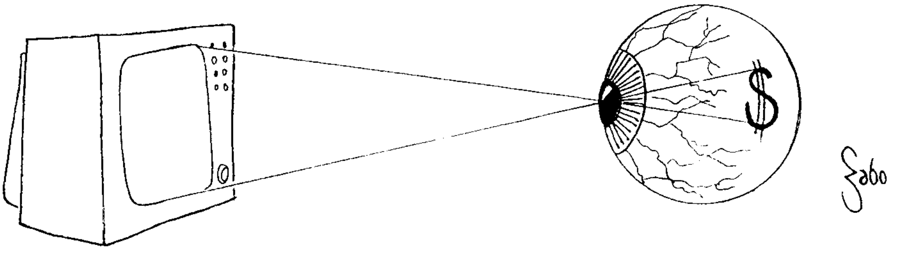
We wish to express our deep indebtedness to Dallas Smythe. His work is the starting point for our own. However much our work has traveled from this start, we have never forgotten his insistence on the productive material activity of audiences. Dallas was and is a materialist in the jungle paradise of idealism.



part. The media, therefore, are at once a real part of the economy and a real reflection of it. This is why we say that "watching as working" is both a real economic process, a value-creating process, and a metaphor, a reflection of value creation in the economy as a whole.

Let us begin with the advertising-supported commercial media as part of the whole economy. How do they make a profit? A short answer would be: the media speed up the selling of commodities, their circulation from production to consumption. Hence they speed the realization of value (the conversion of value into a money form) embodied in commodities produced everywhere in the economy. Through advertising, the rapid consumption of commodities cuts down on circulation and storage costs for industrial capital. Media capital (e.g., broadcasters) receives a portion of surplus value (profits) of industrial capital as a kind of rent paid for access to audiences. The differences between this rent and its costs of production (e.g., wages paid to media industry workers) constitute its profit.

But what is it precisely that industrial capital rents? Media capital sells something, sells the use of something, to capital-as-a-whole. If media capital could not sell this "something," if this "something" when used by the buyer—capital-as-a-whole—did not speed the realization of value embodied in commodities-in-general, the media would receive no payment (rent). Thus the production of this "something" is the central problem for commercial media.

This "something" has been fuzzily described in the communications literature. Is it "attention"? Is it "access," and, if it is, access to what? To "markets"? To "audiences"? And what are these audiences? Are they materials, tools, conditions? What is fuzzy about these answers is that they describe the "something" from the point of view of the interest of the *buyer:* in terms of how capital-as-a-whole proposes to *use* it. But they do not describe the "something" from the point of view of the *seller:* in terms of how it is *produced.* In short, such answers do not describe the "something" as a problem for the media, which is the clue to the development of their specific practices.

For the media, above all, this "something" is *time.* But whose time? What kind of time? What happens in it that takes time? It is clear that this time would be empty and unsellable if people didn't watch. It is therefore something about watching-time that is sold by the media to advertisers.

This watching is, first, a human capacity for activity. It is not a thing, not simply a product in which value is, in Marx's word, "congealed." It is a capacity for doing something. We use "doing" generically to include seeing, listening—in general, capacities of perception. Watching is human activity through which human beings relate to the external physical world and to each other.

Watching is guided by our attention, so we often see or hear less than is there to be seen or heard. But we also see or hear more than is there. Elementary psychology books are filled with examples in which watching "completes a figure," "makes a connection," "fills in the blanks." Gibson (9, ch. 11) has found that we actually see behind obstructing or occluding objects: We see hidden surfaces. Indeed, this seeing "more" is the basis of Williamson's (21) analysis of decoding advertisements. All watching contains an element of what we call "watching extra."

It is this "watching extra" that must be produced in the media, for it is the "something"—and the only "something"—they sell.

Precisely because watching is an unspecialized, general-purpose capacity, it is capable of being modified by its objects, by what we watch, how, and under what conditions. Watching has a historical character; this is especially true of "watching extra." What is so striking about the modern commercial media is that for the first time this "extra" has a specific social form: it is a commodity. Recall that this "something" is a human capacity for a certain kind of activity, which can be put to use by the buyer. The trade literature offers many testaments to the problem of getting people to watch. As ex-sportscaster Howard Cosell noted: "You've got to deliver 40 million people. Do you know the strain of that? You've got to deliver them. . . . If you don't, you're gone. The business chews you up" (*Sport*, February 1979). But when the activity of watching becomes subject to commodity production, the central problem for the media is not simply to get people to watch but to get them to watch *extra*. The problem for the commercial media is to maximize the production of this commodity and to attempt to minimize the costs of doing so.

What is the form in which these costs appear? We can answer this if we ask the following question: when we, the audience, watch TV, for whom do we watch? It is not hard to get people to tell you that some things they want to watch, and some things they don't particularly want to watch but they do anyway. Indeed, as Jerry Mander's son Kai remarked, "I don't want to watch but I can't help it. It makes me watch it." Although formally free to watch or not to watch, we are often practically compelled. The literature is full of the phenomenology of felt compulsion (e.g., 13, 22).

This phenomenology in itself does not directly describe the commodity-form of watching; but it does point to the fact that somehow this "extra" watching is being extracted in our interaction with the media. But extra watching does exist as a commodity. Some of what appears on television is a cost of production to media capital; some of what appears is not a cost but revenue that media capital receives from those who will use it. The costs are incurred to produce what we will call *necessary watching-time*—necessary to reproduce our activity of watching. The revenues are received for the *surplus watching-time* that is extracted. The problem for commercial media is to extract the maximum surplus watching-time on the basis of the minimum necessary. The logic of the media is governed by the expanded reproduction of surplus watching-time.

We argue that necessary and surplus watching exist as real economic magnitudes, identifiable and measureable. They are conceptually defined on the basic generalized human capacity for watching, the fundamental activity that constitutes a population as an audience. Watching-time is the mode of expression of value. What we are exploring is the struggle over the valorization of the activity of watching.

We believe that this argument offers an understanding of important features in the modern history of the commercial media: the changes in its technology, its composition and segmentation of audiences, the development of the blended forms of messages such as the "advertorial" and the "infomercial," and above all the acceleration of time that pervades the media. The test of our conception, of course, will be the understanding it offers of this history.

We have found the real meaning of "watching as working" by looking *into* the media, by "putting the audience into the tube" so we can watch its watching. But having done so, we can now look *out from* the media into the whole economy; we can treat the media as a metaphor for the economy.

We know that virtually anything can appear on television and that today virtually everyone watches. In short, the media are potentially a reflection of everything. But the vast literature of what TV teaches has overlooked the possibility that it might show us, right there on the screen, the production and realization of surplus value; that all its devices might reflect the organization of human labor in the economy as a whole; that through the relation of the watching populations to media capital it might reflect the relation of the working population to capital-as-a-whole.

In our view, the media are a great fishbowl. Every economic process, every movement of value, every step in the circuit of capital appears as a reflection, not simply through or in the media but *as* the media-audience process itself. The media economy is a fishbowl that reflects the whole thing of which it is a part. In particular, the struggles over the valorization of human activity in the media reflect these processes in the whole economy. The media are indeed a metaphor.

"Watching as working"? Really? Metaphorically? Again our answer is: both. It is metaphorical because it is real; it is real because it is a part of something real, which it reflects and for which it therefore can stand as a metaphor. We will look into the commercial media in order to see how the whole economy, embodied in it, is reflected there.

We attempt to develop the basis for a materialist theory of the advertising-supported media industries in advanced industrial societies, focusing specifically on commercial broadcasting as the prime example.

Most studies of the media (both in the mainstream and critical traditions) have focused on messages as their central unit of analysis. Despite the many differences within the field, there is a broad unstated agreement that the discipline of media communication is about the production, distribution, reception, interpretation, and effects of messages. From two-step theory, to uses and gratifications, to cultivation analysis, to agenda setting, to the study of ideology and texts, to the controversy over the New World Information Order, and even to the debate concerning the effects of the new information technologies, the focus has been on messages. More specifically, the concentration has been on how these messages are used, on what meanings are generated in the interaction between messages and people. The history of communication, then, has been a study of the use-values of messages, their meaning.

That this should be the focus of the study of the commercial broadcast media in particular is somewhat surprising when we view the industry in historical perspective, for messages have *never* been the central commodity that has been produced and traded. In the early years of broadcasting, as Williams reminds us, there was little attention given to the content of the new media: "Unlike all previous communications technologies, radio and television were systems primarily designed for transmission and reception as abstract processes, with little or no definition of preceding content. . . . the means of communication preceded their content" (20, p. 25). In the United States, the first role of the electronic media was to stimulate the sale of radio sets (2). Later, as the commercial networks developed, the sale of audiences took precedence as the industry's major activity. Messages were integrated within this wider industrial production.

There has been increasing recognition in recent years, particularly among critical scholars, of a failure to penetrate to the core understanding of the role of media in advanced capitalism. The traditional concepts of base/superstructure, relative autonomy, ideology, and hegemony are not sufficient to explain the dynamic changes taking place in mass media. As Garnham wrote:

> *So long as Marxist analysis concentrates on the ideological content of mass media it will be difficult to develop coherent political strategies for resisting the underlying dynamic of development in the cultural sphere in general which rests firmly and increasingly upon the logic of generalized commodity production. In order to understand the structure of our culture, its production, consumption and reproduction and of the role of the mass media in that process, we need to confront some of the central questions of political economy in general* (8, p. 145).

Smythe (18, 19) also expressed explicit dissatisfaction with the existing state of critical media analysis. For Smythe, Marxism has had a "blindspot" about communications, concentrating on the concept of ideology instead of addressing the issue of the economic role of mass media in advanced capitalism. Smythe gave two original formulations to this problem. First, he argued that mass media produce audiences as commodities for sale to advertisers. The program content of mass media is merely the "free lunch" that invites people to watch. It is the sale of their audience-power to advertisers, however, that is the key to the whole system of capitalist communications. Second, he claimed that advertisers put this audience-power to work by getting audiences to market commodities to themselves. Audiences thus labor for advertisers to ensure the distribution and consumption of commodities-in-general. While one cannot overestimate Smythe's contribution to a proper understanding of the political economy of communications, the stress on audience labor for the manufacturers of branded commodities has tended to deflect the specificity of the analysis away from communications to the ensuing consumption behavior of the audience. Ultimately, Smythe was concerned with drawing attention to the place of communications in the wider system of social reproduction and the reproduction of capital. We believe that the exploration of the blindspot needs to be located more firmly *within* the media industries rather than focusing on their wider role.

Broadly speaking, Garnham and Smythe were attempting to break with "symbolism" and "meaning" as the starting point of materialist analysis: They were seeking to break with message-based analysis and the study of use-values. We strongly support this attempt but wish to phrase it in slightly different terms in trying to establish a general framework for a critical materialist analysis. While all messages have a use-value, within the commercial media messages are part not only of a system of meaning but also of a system of exchange. They form part of the process wherein media industries attempt to generate profit by producing and selling commodities in a market setting. Within the sphere of commercial mass media, messages have both a use-value *and* an exchange-value. More precisely, the use-values of messages are integrated within a system of exchange-value. To understand use-value we have to adequately contextualize its relation to exchange-value. This means a switch in focus from the question of the use-value (meaning) of messages, not because the understanding of meaning is unimportant but because we can understand it within its concrete specificity only once we fully understand the conditions created by exchange-value. The remainder of this article attempts to unravel the system of exchange-value that constitutes the system of advertising-supported media.

To properly comprehend the system of exchange-value within which the commercial media are based we need to understand its economic logic and to answer three related questions: What is the commodity-form sold by commercial media? Who produces this media commodity and under what conditions? What is the source of value and surplus value in this process? Once we have answered these questions we can then formulate an adequate context within which we can understand the role of messages.

What is the commodity-form sold by the commercial media?

At first glance, the answer to this question seems obvious and straightforward: Media sell *audiences* to advertisers. We need, however, to pin down specifically what about audiences is important for the mass media. For all his emphasis on communications, Smythe does not ask this question directly. For him it is audience-power put to work for advertisers that is important. There is no doubt that this is what advertisers are interested in, but it does not mean that the media are interested in the same thing. What advertisers buy with their advertising dollars is audiences' watching-time, which is all the media have to sell. That advertising rates are determined by the size and demographics of the audience is ample confirmation of this. When media "sell time" to a sponsor, it is not abstract time that is being sold but the time of particular audiences. Further, this is not (as Smythe contends) time spent in self-marketing and consuming advertisers' commodities, but rather time spent in watching and listening—communications-defined time. What the media sell (because they own the means of communication) is what they control—the watching-time of the audience.

Most critical analyses of advertising and media have been stalled at this point. The watching-time of the audience has been (quite correctly) characterized as the domination of "free time" by capital to aid in realizing the value of commodities-in-general. For example, Ewen (6) and Baran and Sweezy (1) concentrate on this point, as does Smythe. No matter how much Smythe stresses the oppositional activities of audiences in constructing alternative life-styles, however, he drifts back to the use-value of messages—meanings and their relationship to consumption. The discussion of audiences should not stop here. The audience as a market is the first form of organization of this commodity, but not the last.

The recognition of watching-time as the media commodity is a vital step in the break with message-based definitions of media and audiences. It makes the problem an internal one to mass communications. The focus on watching-time is crucial to establishing an audience-centered theory of mass communications from a materialist perspective based on the analysis of exchange-value.

Who produces this media commodity and under what conditions?

Networks consider themselves as the producers and sellers of audiences (3; 16, pp. 4–5), and critical thinkers have tended to take this at face value, accepting the notion that because networks *exchange* audiences they also *produce* them. It is surprising to find this confusion in the writing of Marxist critics on the topic of communication, since they do not make this error in writing on, say, the auto industry, or petrochemicals, or indeed on communications hardware itself. But, when it comes to communications, the myth of the "productivity of capital" (14) still befuddles us.

To avoid this trap we have to distinguish several common confusions. First, we must distinguish the production of messages from the production of audiences. The staff in a network newsroom produces news. The viewers watching it do not produce the news, but they do participate in producing the commodity of audience-time, as does the network staff. Networks could produce messages that no one might watch, in which case they would barely be able to give away that time, let alone sell it. The commodity audience-time is produced by both the networks and the audience.

Second, thus, we have to distinguish between the production of audiences and their exchange. There is a lot of talk in the industry about the media producing audiences, but they have not produced what they are selling. The networks merely sell the time that has been produced for them by others (by the audience). It is only because they own the means of communication that they have title to the commodity which has been produced for them by others. Like Manchester manufacturers more than a century ago (see, for example, 5), networks suffer from the self-serving myth of the productivity of capital. Once we have sorted out these confusions we can see that the answer to this second question is that *both* audiences and the networks produce the commodity audiences' watching-time.

What is the source of value and surplus value in this process?

Through their own station licenses and those of their affiliates, and through their ownership of the means of communication, the networks have control of 24 hours a day of broadcasting time. How is this time that the networks control made valuable—how is it *valorized?*

The surface economics of commercial television seem quite simple. Network expenses can be defined as operating costs plus program costs. Their revenues are advertising dollars from advertisers who buy the time of the audiences that the programming has captured. Networks hope that revenues are more than expenses—more than an empty hope, of course, for it is almost impossible to lose money if one owns a VHF station. The average cost of a 30-second network prime-time commercial in 1985 was $119,000. Based only on prime-time (8–11 P.M.) sales, each network collects $60 million a week from advertisers.

We need, however, to dig beneath the seeming superficiality of commercial television economics and ask specifically how and by whom value and surplus value (profit) are produced. Let us trace through the process in detail. The networks buy (or license) programs from independent producers to entice the audience to watch. Networks then fill this empty time that they control by buying the watching-power of the audience. Having purchased this "raw material," they then process it and sell it to advertisers for more than they paid for it. As a concrete example, a network pays independent producers $400,000 per episode for a half-hour situation comedy. The program is in fact 24 minutes long; the other 6 minutes is advertising time. Let us presume that this 6 minutes is divided into twelve 30-second spots that sell for $100,000 each. They thus yield $1,200,000 in income, which results in a surplus of $800,000 for 30 minutes of the broadcasting day.

If we keep in mind that it is the watching activity of the audience that is being bought and sold, we can see precisely where value and surplus value are produced. It is necessary for the audience to watch 4 of the 12 spots to produce value equal to the cost of programming. For 4 spots the audience watches for itself; for the remaining 8 spots the audience is watching *surplus-time* (over and above the cost of programming). Here the audience watches to produce surplus value for the owners of the means of communication, the networks or the local broadcasters.

Networks wish to make necessary watching-time as short as possible and surplus watching-time as long as possible. The struggle to increase surplus time and decrease necessary time animates the mass media. One way in which this ratio can be manipulated is to make the advertising time longer. Program time is made into ad time so that, in the example above, two more 30-second spots could be added by making the programming only 23 minutes long. In that case the ratio between necessary and surplus time (presuming program costs remain the same) extends to $\frac{4}{10}$ from $\frac{4}{8}$, resulting in more surplus time. This indeed is what local stations do to syndicated shows. Portions of the program are cut out to make space for more ads. This strategy, based upon extending advertising in real time, can be labeled the extraction of *absolute* surplus value. In this scenario there is a continual attempt to expand total advertising time.

However, at a certain point, there is a limit to the expansion of advertising time. Audiences will simply stop watching if there is too much advertising and not enough programming. The TV Code of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) limits nonprogramming time to 9.5 minutes per hour in prime time (although most stations violate this limit [15]). The networks in this situation must adopt new strategies to manipulate the ratio between necessary and surplus time. If the networks cannot make people watch advertising longer in absolute terms, they can make the time of watching advertising more intense—they can make the audience watch *harder.*

There are two major ways in which this extraction of* relative *surplus value can be accomplished—by reorganizing the watching population, and by reorganizing the watching process.

Since the late 1950s, as market research has grown in sophistication and advertisers are able to pinpoint quite precisely their target market, the media have found it profitable to deliver these segmented audiences to sponsors. Barnouw (2) has given a powerful account of how the obsession with producing the right demographics has come to dominate the everyday practices of broadcasters (see also 10). Advertisers judge the effectiveness of various media in terms of their "cost per thousand"—how much it costs to reach 1,000 people. However, the watching-time of all types of audiences is not the same; some market segments are more valuable because that is who advertisers wish to reach.

For instance, advertisers will pay more to buy time during sporting events because the audience for sports includes a large proportion of adult men whom advertisers of high-price consumer articles (such as automobiles) are anxious to reach. As John DeLorean put it: "The difference in paying $7 a thousand for sport and $4 a thousand for 'bananas' [prime time] is well worth it. You know you're not getting Maudie Frickert. You're reaching men, the guys who make the decision to buy a car. There's almost no other way to be sure of getting your message out to them" (12, p. 224). Now men certainly do watch prime time, but in prime time, automobile advertisers are paying not only for the male audience but also for the rest of the audience, many of whom are presumed to have no interest in purchasing cars. For every thousand people whose time is bought by advertisers on prime time, then, there is much "wasted" watching by "irrelevant" viewers. Specification and fractionation of the audience leads to a form of "concentrated viewing" by the audience in which there is (from the point of view of advertisers) little wasted watching. Because that advertising time can be sold at a higher rate by the media we can say that the audience organized in this manner watches "harder" and with more intensity and efficiency. In fact, because the value of the time goes up, necessary watching-time decreases and surplus watching-time increases, thus leading to greater surplus value.

The other major way in which relative surplus value operates in the media is through the division of time. Whereas the concern with demographics reorganizes the watching population, the concern with time division reorganizes the watching process. This involves a redivision of the limited time available to increase the ratio between necessary and surplus time (see 3, p. 289). The major way to accomplish this is to move toward shorter commercials; and indeed, over the last 25 years, the number of nonprogram elements has dramatically skyrocketed, although the absolute amount of advertising time has increased only by 2.5 minutes an hour. In 1965, the three major networks showed an average of 1,839 ads per week. The figure rose to 2,200 in 1970, to 3,487 in 1975, to 4,636 in 1980, and to 4,997 in 1983 (*Television/Radio Age*, June 1985). Today the 30-second commercial predominates, although there are a great number of 15-second commercials also. They comprised 6.5 percent of all network ads in 1985 and it is estimated that in 1986 this figure will climb to 18 percent (*Fortune*, December 23, 1985).

The basic economic logic works as follows. Assume there are five 30-second commercials in a commercial break. If each sells for $100,000, income to the network is $500,000. To increase the revenue derived from this time, the network divides it into ten 15-second slots offered to advertisers for $60,000 each. If there were enough demand to sell these spots the income to the network would be $600,000 instead of the previous $500,000.

But why would advertisers agree to this price hike? After all, they are now paying more per second although less per spot. Advertisers, however, are not concerned about the value of time but about the frequency with which the market can be reached. The shorter spots give them twice the number of ads without raising the price by a proportionate amount. And, indeed, advertisers believe that a combination of 30-second and 15-second versions of the same ad works well in conveying almost the same information. If the program price remains the same, viewers will have to watch for less necessary time to cover its cost.

We must emphasize that the time of audiences is the key to the process by which networks valorize the time they control. It is also the limits of human perception (that is, the limits to watching) that guides the division of time. Advertisers may be able to construct beautifully crafted 10-second commercials, but these are useless if they do not work on the audience in that short time. "If we can demonstrate that the American consuming public can absorb and act on a 15-second unity, can the 7.5-second commercial be far behind" (*Fortune*, December 23, 1985). Human watching, listening, perceiving, and learning activity act as a constraint to the system.

Our use so far of the familiar concepts of Marxian economic theory to analyze the valorization of time by the networks has been a pointed one. Central to the whole paradigm of Marxian economics is the notion that human labor—not capital or technology—is the basis of the productivity of societies. Similarly, in the analysis of broadcasting economics, it is audience watching that is vital to the whole process. In a very real sense we can see that there are many similarities between industrial labor and watching activity. In fact, watching is a form of labor.

When the audience watches commercial television it is working for the media, producing both value and surplus value.

Again, this relationship should be seen as both metaphorical and real. Watching is a real extension of the logic of industrial labor even if not the same as industrial labor. However, as metaphor, it illuminates the obscure workings of the economy in general. As Ricoeur writes: "metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality" (17, p. 7).

Watching as metaphor reflects the dynamic of the capitalist economy. In Marx's analysis of the work day, the productivity of capitalism is based upon the purchase of one key commodity—labor-power. This is the only element in the means of production that produces more value than it takes to reproduce itself. Like all commodities, it has a value, a cost—the cost of its production (or reproduction). The cost of labor-power (the capacity to labor) is the cost of the socially determined level of the means of subsistence: that is, what it costs to ensure that the laborer can live and be fit for work the next day. The amount of labor-time that it takes to produce value equivalent to this minimum cost is labeled by Marx as socially necessary labor (necessary to reproduce labor-power). Socially necessary labor-time produces value equivalent to wages. The remaining labor-time is labeled as surplus labor-time, where surplus value is generated. In the nonwork part of the day workers spend wages (on shelter, food, children, etc.) that will ensure that they will be fit and healthy enough to go to work. During nonwork time they thus *reproduce* their labor-power.

How is this process reflected as metaphor within the broadcast media? The network owns the means of production—communication—which makes possible the production of commodities and gives the network ownership of those commodities. While workers sell labor-power to capitalists, audiences sell watching-power to media owners; and as the use-value of labor-power is labor, so the use-value of watching-power is watching, the capacity to watch. In addition, as the value of labor-power is fixed at the socially determined level of the means of subsistence (thus ensuring that labor-power will be reproduced), so the value of watching-power is the cost of its reproduction—

the cost of programming, which ensures that viewers will watch and be in a position to watch extra (the time of advertising). In this formulation it is only the time of advertising that comprises the "work day" for the audience. The programming, the value of watching-power, is the wage of the audience, the variable capital of the communications industry. It is also time for the reproduction of watching-power, the time of consumption, the time of nonwork. As the work day is split into two, so the work part of the viewing day—advertising time—is split between socially necessary watching-time and surplus watching-time.

Labor and watching share many other characteristics, having evolved historically in similar ways.

For instance, the early history of industrial capitalism is tied up with attempts by capital to extend the time of the working day in an absolute sense, thus manipulating the ratio between necessary and surplus time. Within the development of the commercial media system, this phase is represented by broadcasting from the late 1920s to the early 1960s. In the first years of commercial broadcasting (extending into the 1930s), broadcasters struggled to persuade advertisers to sponsor shows. The more shows sponsored, the more audiences could be sold to advertisers. This was an extension in the amount of time that people watched/listened for capital. It also has to be remembered that until the introduction of spot selling in the 1960s, programs were advertising agency creations, with the sponsor's name and product appearing everywhere (not only in ads) (3).

However, as Marx realized, this absolute extension of the working day cannot go on indefinitely. Unions and collective bargaining limited the length of the working day, forcing capital to increase the *intensity* of labor. The concept of relative surplus value initially meant the cheapening of consumer goods that reproduce labor-power so that the amount of necessary time would be decreased. In the era of monopoly capitalism two other major factors contribute to the extraction of relative surplus value—the reorganization of the workplace and the introduction of technologically efficient instruments of production (4). As Marx writes: "The production of absolute surplus value turns exclusively upon the length of the working day: the production of relative surplus value, revolutionises out and out the technical processes of labor and the composition of society." We have already referred to the stress on demographics (reorganization of the working population) and the redivision of time (reorganization of the work process). Watching and labor, then, display many historical similarities in the movement between absolute and relative surplus value.

In a very important text published in English for the first time in 1976, Marx distinguishes between the *formal* and the *real* subsumption of labor (14, pp. 943–1085). As capitalist relations of production expand, they come into contact with other types of relations of production—e.g., feudal relations in agriculture. Capitalism does not effect a change in these other relations but merely "tacks them on" to its own operations: "capital subsumes the labor process as it finds it, that is to say, it takes over an *existing labor process,* developed by different and more archaic modes of production." Thus, while capital subsumes the process, it does not establish specifically capitalist relations of production in that sphere; it does not need to. The old relations are used in ways that benefit capital without being organized under its relations of production. Marx argues that the formal subsumption of labor is based upon increasing the length of the working day: that is, on absolute surplus value.

In broadcasting, the formal subsumption of watching activity is linked to the period when advertisers had direct control of programming (when they wrote and produced it). Broadcasting did not develop initially as an advertising medium; its first purpose was to aid in the selling of radio sets. Only later was time on the airwaves sold by A.T.&T. to bring in additional revenue. Even when advertising became prominent in the late 1920s and 1930s, networks did little more than lease facilities and sell air time to advertisers who had total control of broadcasting. Thus, capital (advertisers) took over "more archaic" modes of watching for their own ends. Advertisers were interested primarily in the activities of the audience as it related to the consumption of their products. Watching here was "tacked on" to specifically capitalist relations of production without being organized in the same manner.

But the two different relations of production cannot exist side by side indefinitely. Indeed, capitalism constantly works to "wither away" the other mode of production and to introduce capitalist relations of production into that domain. This is labeled as the *real* subsumption of labor. At this stage (which corresponds with the extraction of relative surplus value), "the entire real form of production is altered and a *specifically capitalist form of production* comes into being (at the technological level too)" (14, p. 1024). The "archaic" forms of production are replaced with capitalist relations of production. The old realm is no longer directly subordinate to other domains but itself becomes a proper capitalist enterprise interested primarily in its own productivity rather than being peripheral (yet vital) to something else.

In broadcasting, the shift from the formal to the real subsumption of watching took place in the late 1950s.

By the late 1950s, it was proving inefficient (for the network) to have the audience watch exclusively for one advertiser for 30 to 60 minutes. The media could generate more revenue for themselves if they could *reorganize* the time of watching by rationalizing their program schedule. The move to spot selling was an attempt to increase the ratio of necessary to surplus watching-time. There was a limit to how much one advertiser could pay for a 30- or 60-minute program. If the networks could control the programming and the advertising time within it, then they could generate more revenue (by selling spots) from multiple advertisers, all of whom individually paid less. Initially advertisers resisted this rationalization and the subsumption of their individual interests under the general interests of media capital. In the end, however, rising program costs, legal objections to advertisers' control, and scandals drove the networks to move toward full control of their schedules (2). This resulted in the double reorganization of the watching population and the watching process under specifically capitalist relations of production.

There is another dimension along which watching-labor shares characteristics with labor in the economy-in-general—both are viewed as unpleasant by the people who have to perform either activity. The history of working-class resistance to the process of wage labor and various sociological studies illustrate that for many people in modern society, work is not an enjoyable activity. People, on the whole, work not because they like their jobs but because they have to. Work has become a means to an end rather than an end in itself; labor is a form of alienated activity.

Similarly, consider the attitudes of the watching audience to the time of advertising. Despite the fact that huge amounts of money (much more than on programming) are spent on producing attractive commercials, people do all they can to avoid them. Data indicate that almost 30 percent of viewers simply leave the room or attend to alternative technologies during the commercial breaks (7). They also simply switch channels in the hope that they can find another program to watch rather than more ads. (Switching between the major networks is rather unproductive on this score as they all tend to have their commercial breaks at the same time.) Indeed, a 1984 report by the J. Walter Thompson advertising company estimated that by 1989 only 55 to 60 percent of television audiences will remain tuned in during the commercial break. Commercial viewing levels are decreasing. The remote channel changer is a major factor in this "zapping" of commercials, as is the spread of video cassette recorders. When programs are recorded to be watched at a later time, one can simply skip over the commercials by fast-forwarding through them. The owners of the means of communication are faced here with a curious problem—the audience could watch programs (get paid) without doing the work (watching commercials) that produces value and surplus value.

These findings have not been lost on the advertising or television industries, who have increasingly recognized that the traditional concept of a "ratings point" may no longer be valid. Ratings measure program watching rather than commercial watching. Indeed, it seems that there is much disparity between the two and advertisers are starting to voice their discontent at having to pay for viewers who may not be watching their ads at all. This has led the ratings companies to experiment with new measures of the audience. The most intriguing development is the "people meters," a device on the TV with a separate button for each participating household member. Individuals "punch in" when they start watching and "punch out" when they stop, providing advertisers and broadcasters with a more precise measure of the level of commercial viewing. There could be no clearer indication of the similarities between watching and labor. Just as workers in a factory punch in and punch out, so too will viewers be evaluated along similar lines.

It is instructive to note that no one would be worried if people were "zapping" the programs and watching ads in greater numbers; the industry would be undisturbed. But when the new technologies of cable and VCRs threaten the viewing patterns of commercial time, then the very foundations of the broadcasting industry begin to shake in anticipation of the consequences.

Although we have pointed out many similarities between watching and labor, we do not regard them as identical activities. For instance, watching has no formal contract for the exchange of watching-power, and there can be no enforcement of the informal contract. We have sought to identify the broad dynamic through which watching activity is brought into the realm of the economic and the manner in which watching activity, under the conditions of advanced capitalist production, reflects in a spectacular way the workings of the real.

While a stress on demographics ("narrowcasting") was a strategy to increase the extraction of **relative** ***surplus value, it also simultaneously extends the total amount of time that the audience watches (and thus watches advertising).***

Since the continued spread of cable in the 1970s and 1980s, there has been a very dramatic shift in viewing patterns in the United States. In 1975–1976, according to Nielsen figures, the three major networks commanded among them 89 percent of the watching audience during prime time (*New York Times*, October 16, 1985, p. C-22). By 1985 that figure was down to 73 percent. This does not mean that people are watching less television; indeed, by 1984 the average family viewed an all-time high of almost 50 hours a week. People thus are watching more TV and less of the networks. The extra viewing has been diverted largely into offerings available on cable television. Those homes with access only to regular over-the-air broadcast television watched only 42 hours and 22 minutes a week in 1985, while those with cable and subscription services watched almost 58 hours a week. Clearly cable television (based upon narrowcasting to specific audiences) increases the total amount of time that people watch television. While some of this extra watching goes to pay TV services (without advertising), much of it is still bound up with commercially sponsored programs. Narrowcasting, then, also increases absolute surplus value.

Up until now, we have made a rather strict distinction between programming and advertising. In the historical development of the commercial media system, however, the boundaries between the two were very often blurred. The function of programming is much more than merely capturing the watching activity of a specific demographic group of the market. Programming also has to provide the right environment for the advertising that will be inserted within it. Advertisers seek compatible programming vehicles that stress the life-styles of consumption. Thus, in the 1950s, the very popular and critically acclaimed "anthology" series were dropped by the networks because they focused on working-class settings and complex psychological states, neither of which was conducive to the advertisers' needs for glamorous consumer-oriented life-styles and the instant and simple "fixes" offered by their commodities to the problems of modern living. The anthology series were replaced by programs much more suited to the selling needs of advertisers. Further, actors and stars moved easily between programs and commercials. At a more explicit level, advertisers sought to have their products placed *within* the program itself. In all these ways we can see a blurring between the message content of the commercials and the message content of the programming.

Although many writers (e.g., 2) have commented on this phenomenon, they have not noticed how this blurring is enormously intensified by the move to narrowcasting. In each portion of the fractionated audience, from the point of view of the message content, the difference between the program content and the ad content constantly diminishes. Both ads and programs draw upon the specific audience to construct their message "code." The drawback of the mass audience for broadcasting is usually thought to be that the program may attract a mass audience without necessarily attracting a mass market for certain commodities: hence the importance of demographics for advertisers. But the problem has not usually been perceived within the sphere of watching itself. Broadcasting produces only a loose compatibility between programs and commercials. Broadcasting limits blurring while narrowcasting overcomes these limits.

In terms of message content, the phenomenon of blurring has two aspects: part of the program is really an ad, and part of the ad is really a program.

Although there may appear to be a formal symmetry at work, within the sociomaterial conditions of the media the first aspect dominates the second. The commercial form is the dynamic element in the process. If part of the program is really an ad, then part of the program time is not really consumption-time: rather, it is labor-time, and the length of the working day has been extended. The program as the extension of the ad shows us the increase in the magnitude of labor—time of watching. It contributes to absolute surplus value. Within narrowcasting, the progressive fractionation of the audience intensifies both absolute and relative surplus value. From such a viewpoint there appear to be two "media revolutions." The first—broadcasting—converts nonwork leisure time into the sphere of watching-time (both consumption watching-time and labor watching-time). The second—narrowcasting—converts consumption watching-time (programming) into labor watching-time (ads). Because there is a limit to advertising time, media have to gain more surplus from the existing time. "Blurring" accomplishes this by converting program into ad, by converting consumption watching-time into labor watching-time. While this process is observable within broadcasting, it is greatly intensified by narrowcasting.

Televised sports are one such example of blurring. Values of masculinity and fraternity are present in both ads and programs; sports personalities flit between the two. The sponsorship of televised sporting events (e.g., the Volvo Grand Prix of Tennis, the A.T.&T. Championships) is also an attempt to convert program into ad.

Within the field of broadcasting itself, segmented programming leads to blurring. For instance, in 1983, Action for Children's Television petitioned the Federal Communications Commission to recognize certain Saturday morning children's programs—those that featured toys successfully sold in stores as their primary characters—for what they really were: 30-minute-long commercials.

The formation of the MTV cable network highlights this movement most dramatically. On MTV the entire 24 hours of the viewing day is advertising time—between the ads for commodities-in-general are placed ads for record albums (rock videos—the "programming"). Objectively, all time on MTV is commercial time. Subjectively, also, it is very difficult to distinguish between ad and program. The same directors, actors, dancers, artists, etc., move between videos and ads until the lines between the two blur and disappear (11).

The best example of the blurring under consideration is that of the "commercial on the commercial." "The Commercial Show," a cable program in Manhattan, "consists of old commercials; advertisers can buy time to put new commercials between the old ones" (*Wall Street Journal*, February 4, 1982). The blurring here is so complete that it shows dramatically the difference between consumption-time and labor-time. There is no better example of the fact that the same kind of message has two fundamentally different functions. One could hardly find a better reason to abandon a message-based definition of the messages themselves.

The unusual framework we have laid out should be seen not as a rigid application of Marxian labor theory and concepts to the realm of leisure, but rather as an attempt to explain the dynamics of the advertising-supported media industries, their "laws of motion."

We believe that this theory explains in a unified way a number of recent developments: the move to shorter commercials, the stress on demographics, the evolution of narrowcasting, the creation of new ratings measures. Looking farther afield, this framework also lends an explanation to the movements in Western Europe toward commercial broadcasting in which the watching activities of the audience can be more fully integrated within a "productive" sphere.

Moreover, this framework allows us to understand the basic division in the message system between programs and ads. Many writers have commented that ads are much better constructed than the bulk of network programming. Barnouw (2) believes that ads are a new American art form; it does indeed seem that the artistic talent of our society is concentrated there. On the average, ads cost eight times as much to produce as programs. Why should this be the case? Our theoretical framework provides an answer: The reason ads are technically so good and programs generally so poor is that they have a different status within the communications commodity system. Programs are messages that have to be "sold" to consumers—they are in fact *consumer goods*. Like most consumer items in the modern marketplace they are products of a mass production system based upon uniformity and are generally of a poor quality. Program messages, like consumer goods in general, are designed for instant, superficial gratification and long-term disappointment that ensures a return trip to the marketplace. They are produced as cheaply as possible for a mass audience.

In contrast, we can label commercials *capital goods*—they are used by the owners of the means of production to try to stimulate demand for particular branded commodities. Like machines in a factory (and unlike consumer goods), they are not meant to break down after a certain period of time. Although the objects of their attempted persuasion are consumers, they are not "sold" to consumers and consumers do not buy them (as far as we know people do not tune in television to watch commercials as a first priority).

As with other objects used by capital, no expense is spared in producing the best possible good. Also like capital goods, commercials are tax-deductible. During programming time (consumption watching-time), audiences create meaning for themselves. During commercial time (labor watching-time), audiences create meaning for capital. It is little wonder that commercials whose function is to communicate (and not just get attention) should be the "best things on television" and the only part of television to have realized the potentials of the medium.

The main contention of this article has been that the activity of watching through the commercial media system is subject to the same process of valorization as labor-time in the economy in general. This is not to suggest that they can be identified as exactly the same type of activity, for clearly they produce different types of commodities. Factory labor produces a material object, whereas watching activity does not. However, the modern evolution of the mass media under capitalism is governed by the appropriation of surplus human activity. The development of this appropriation is a higher stage in the development of the value-form of capital. Its logic reproduces the logic described by Marx for the earlier form, but its concrete form is in fact a new stage: the value form of human activity itself. The empirical reflection of this is that the process of consciousness becomes valorized. There is thus a partial truth in the label attached by Smythe and others to the modern mass media—as "consciousness industry"—except that they have so far conceptualized it upside-down. Mass media are not characterized primarily by what they put *into* the audience (messages) but by what they take *out* (value).

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