

## PROBING THE BLINDSPOT: THE AUDIENCE COMMODITY

*Sut Jhally*

The "blindspot" debate, conducted between Dallas Smythe, Bill Livant and Graham Murdock in the pages of this journal, raised some vital issues concerning the Marxist analysis of the communications industry.<sup>1</sup> In this comment I wish to address three central issues of the discussion: the audience as a commodity; the labour of the audience; and the audience commodity as the key to the internal unity of the media. I will argue that Smythe's suggestion of the audience as a commodity can only be defended by a further theoretical elaboration of the key themes, that the notion of audience labour in marketing and consumption cannot be substantiated within a Marxist framework, and that Livant's claim for the internal unity of the media is not consistent with a study that places the analysis of commodity relations at its centre.

Smythe, aware that his central claim that the chief product of mass media are audiences produced as commodities will prove contentious, poses and answers a series of questions which he claims "an historical materialist approach would seem to indicate."<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, he asks the wrong questions and does not provide himself with an opportunity to theoretically specify the basis of his claims. All he comes up with are a number of observations that support his general contention. A set of different questions would have allowed the opportunity to substantiate and specifically probe the blindspot he has perceptively located. These questions are: (1) Does the audience commodity have a use-value, (2) does it have an objective existence, (3) does it have an exchange-value, (4) is it produced by value-adding labour, and (5) is it owned by specific capitalists? These are, I believe, the main parameters of the Marxist definition of a commodity and it is only if all these are satisfied that we can include the term in the wider Marxist analysis of media.

(1) Does the audience commodity have a use-value? Use-value is a relative term. Different consumers will have different use-values for the same commodity. For advertisers of consumer products the use-value of the audience commodity is the movement of commodities-in-general. Also, different audiences will "move" a divergent set of commodities. For advertisers such as the army, use-value is connected to recruitment. For corporate (image-based) advertising, use-value is connected to ideological factors concerning legitimacy.

(2) & (3) Does the audience commodity have an objective existence and does it have an exchange-value? Livant, arguing to put the audience commodity on an objective footing, writes that if Smythe's point of switching analysis from ideological content to objective function is to be taken, there is a need to break with the *message*-based definition of the audience. The definition should rest on objective criteria. The distinction thus becomes one between the audience for

## PROBING THE BLIND SPOT

"Happy Days" and the demographic and psychographic specifics of that audience. This distinction is based on an historical process in which the audience (not necessarily as a commodity) is the factor through which the commodity form is articulated (see below). Thus, in the earlier days of television, the commodity form of mass media was the technology. As Raymond Williams notes, the "major investment was in the means of distribution, and was devoted to production only so far as to make the distribution technically possible and then attractive."<sup>3</sup> A commodity was sold to an audience once the technology had been widely distributed the commodity form of mass media changed to the production of audiences. The development of the modern systems of market research (numbers, demographics, psychographics) has greatly facilitated this process in recent years. Furthermore, as soon as any material "emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground but in relation to all other commodities"<sup>4</sup> (Marx). Hence some audience commodities exchange for more than others. For instance, in the late 1960's, CBS decided to cancel a number of popular prime-time programmes, such as "Andy Griffith" and "Ed Sullivan" because these programmes attracted proportionately more elderly, lower-income, rural audiences. The new programmes, instead, had to try and capture the profitable markets of the young, affluent, urban audiences who would be willing to try new products. This new audience could be sold at a higher price to advertisers. Today, the most valuable TV audience is the sports audience, which, because of its demographic specificity, is sold at approximately twice the price of the prime-time audience. It is important to note here that advertising rates are not based on time but on the objective characteristics of the particular audience. The cost is calculated in terms of cost per thousand viewers reached. As Pete Rozelle of the National Football League says, "our demographics are such that an advertiser paying \$7 per thousand for football really has a better buy than if he paid \$4 per thousand for another programme."<sup>5</sup> The sports audience is more costly because the people reached are mostly men with a decisive role in the decision-making process in the purchase of high-cost consumer items, and because the characteristics of this audience are more precise and specific than the more amorphous, prime-time audience.

(4) Is the audience commodity produced by value-adding labour? Smythe claims that the prime function of advertising-dominated media is to produce audiences as commodities for sale to advertisers. Undoubtedly network executives think that this is what they are doing. However, for us to substantiate this objectively, we would have to show that television undertakes specific actions not merely to draw existing aggregates together (although, strictly speaking, that would be enough) but to create new ones that will sell on the market for more than the original aggregates (raw materials). To illustrate this, an illuminating example can be chosen from the relationship between sports and TV. In 1979, when Pete Rose signed for the Philadelphia Phillies, the latter were able to guarantee his salary from television (\$800,000 a year), *after* it was found that having Rose with the team would significantly raise viewing figures. Rose

signed for the Phillies because he could be used to create a new audience commodity.<sup>6</sup> As in the creation of all commodities for exchange, value is added through the conscious activity of producers. The media work to change sports to produce a new audience commodity.<sup>7</sup> Although the *message* is central to the creation of this new commodity, it is not defined by the message. It is defined by the objective characteristics of the audience commodity.<sup>8</sup>

(5) Is the audience commodity owned by specific capitalists? This is the most vital issue concerning the audience as commodity and is, in a sense, the most ambiguous and problematic. Orthodox Marxists balk at the acceptance of the audience as commodity on this point. The claim is put instead that, although network executives and advertisers talk about buying and selling audiences, *objectively* what is being sold is simply *time*. In this view the audience does not exist as a commodity because it cannot be *owned* by anyone. Fortunately, a number of situations along the Canada/US border have provided us with the material to at least attempt a defence of the notion of audience commodity ownership.<sup>9</sup>

The Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) proposed in 1971 to give cable companies permission to remove commercials from American station broadcasts and to substitute Canadian commercials instead. In August 1973, Rogers Cable of Toronto began to randomly delete commercials from Buffalo station broadcasts. Three Buffalo stations immediately threatened legal action, arguing that the Canadian action was both immoral and *illegal*. While this legal action was ultimately unsuccessful, the policy of random deletion has been stopped and, in the process, a number of interesting relationships have been highlighted. The intriguing question is — what exactly was being “stolen” to prompt this legal threat? The Buffalo stations were threatened with the loss of their Canadian audience, meaning that this audience could not be sold to advertisers, thus resulting in a loss of advertising revenue. While the programmes of the American stations would be used to *produce* the audience commodity, the *selling* would be done by Canadian cable operators. As one broadcasting consultant put it: “substitution is plain stealing.”<sup>10</sup> The present border policy is one of overlapping programme substitution. If the same programme is being shown on both Canadian and American stations at the same time, the cable company blocks out the American signal, thus assuring the Canadian stations an *unfractioned* audience that can be sold to advertisers at a higher cost than if the audience was split between different stations. While the American/Canadian situation certainly highlights the issues, the question of audience commodity ownership is not only an international affair. Within the US and Canada, the FCC and the CRTC have fairly stringent rules protecting markets within a certain geographic range of each other; i.e. if Toronto were in the USA the Buffalo stations would be prevented by FCC regulations from doing *any* selling in that market.

Smythe starts his analysis with the question of the objective definition of the commodity produced by advertising-based media, but unfortunately he addresses the key issues only tangentially and thus fails to establish sufficient theoretical

## PROBING THE BLIND SPOT

support for his argument. The questions posed here are the ones that address the central issues, and while more problematic, I believe that, in the long run, their working through will provide stronger support for Smythe's assertions regarding the audience commodity.

Smythe's second major contention is that the audience commodity *labours productively* for capital in marketing goods to itself, and by reproducing workers' labour power through consumption.<sup>11</sup> Now clearly the term "labour" has some very specific meanings within a Marxist perspective, most importantly that labour is used to create value in the production of commodities. For Smythe it seems that as labour power is a commodity, that which produces it is labour. Because workers can reproduce their labour power *only* through consumption in the monopoly capitalist marketplace, all time becomes work time. Livant clearly agrees with Smythe on the general point although his position as regards the productivity of labour is unclear. The whole discussion of audience labour revolves, however, around the issue of productivity. What is actually meant by productive? For Smythe and Livant the answer would seem to be: "if it is essential for the maintenance of the system of monopoly capitalism it is productive." Clearly this is not a very Marxist position, which would stress that labour creates value which is reflected in the exchange-value of the product.<sup>12</sup>

What then happens to Smythe's suggestion that marketing and consumption are part of productive labour when viewed from the perspective of the Marxist definition of labour? It seems that for Smythe the marketing function is a purely *subjective* act. It is a learning of cues when making up a "mental shopping list" (p. 14). Audience members sit in front of a TV and learn certain actions. Surely there can be no claim that there is anything productive in this activity by itself. For the claim to have any basis it must take place with some form of real (objective) activity — spending income in consumption. It must be in this activity of consumption (subsuming self-marketing) that Smythe locates productive activity. For consumption to be productive it would have to be shown that the consumption involved in creating the commodity labour power is *adding value* to labour power. But if the value of labour power is defined as the value of the means of subsistence of the worker and his family (the Marxist definition), then labour power would have to exchange at this value *plus* the value added by consumption. Thus labour power would have to exchange at above its value.<sup>13</sup> Smythe's claim about the productivity of marketing and consumption cannot remain consistent within a Marxist framework. It only makes sense outside of it, although the alternative framework is not stated and is not plainly obvious. By viewing monopoly capitalism in a holistic manner, Smythe (and Livant, it seems) label the functionally distinct parts with the *essence* of the most vital (production). They mistake an *integration* into monopoly capitalism for the *installation* of monopoly capitalist relations of production.<sup>14</sup> This is not to deny Smythe's claim that advertising by capitalists can be productive, but is to specify that productive activity takes place *within* production (in the age of monopoly capitalism including marketing and distribution), and not in response to this activity, in consumption, which is

## SUT JHALLY

*outside* production. Within production, activity is concerned with the *production* of commodities-in-general. In consumption, activity is geared towards *creating* something else (labour power).<sup>15</sup> The only formulation of audience labour that might remain consistent and fruitful is one which sees that labour is not being performed for advertisers but *for the mass media*. Audience labour is part of the production process of the audience commodity. Their "wages" are the programmes, without which they would not watch TV. The networks get more from advertisers than it costs to produce the audience commodity, so value (or at least surplus) is being created.<sup>16</sup>

Livant, in an extension of Smythe's position, asserts that the notion of audience commodity applies even to non-advertising-based media. Whereas for Smythe it is the content that is cross-marketed, for Livant it is the audience itself that is cross-marketed. The audience is the commodity form through which the media are internally articulated. "In some of the media, *some* of the time, commodities-in-general are being sold; but in all sectors, *all* of the time, the audience commodity is being made. In all sectors it is being traded, in all sectors it is being measured." Just as audience labour was generalized from a specific section to the whole, so now Livant has overextended the useful concept of audience commodity. I think it is indisputable that the audience is the key to the internal unity of the media and that Smythe is correct when he says that the content is cross-marketed. It is quite another thing to say that the audience as a commodity fulfills this function. Within advertising-dominated media, accumulation is based on the sale of the audience commodity. In other media, accumulation is based on the sale of a commodity (book, movie, record) to an audience. All mass media *create* audiences but it is only advertising-based media that *produce* audiences for sale. Thus "Star Wars" was a commodity sold to an audience (or rather a cinema seat was sold for a particular period of time). When "Star Wars" is shown on TV, it is being used as a producer's good to produce an audience for sale to advertisers. When "Star Wars" books are produced they are commodities for sale to an audience. When "Star Wars" music is played on AM radio, it is the audience commodity that is being produced. While the audience and the audience commodity may be comprised of the same aggregates, the specific context of their relations with various media define them in different ways. It is through the audience that the commodity form of mass media is articulated. The audience commodity is not the commodity form through which the media is internally articulated. The term "commodity" is a description of relations. It is not a description of static characteristics.

To conclude, the argument of the audience as a commodity is a vital one for Marxist analysis and should greatly increase a critical comprehension of the workings of mass communication. The claims put forward about audience labour and the internal unity of the media cannot be included within the same analysis in their present formulations, although there may be room for a more limited notion of audience labour and of the audience as the key to the internal unity of the media.

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## PROBING THE BLIND SPOT

### Notes

The present comment is a shortened version of a paper presented at the 1981 Canadian Communications Association meetings in Halifax, "Probing the Blindspot: Issues Concerning the Audience Commodity", mimeo, Communication Studies, Simon Fraser University, 1981.

1. D. Smythe "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism", *CJPST* Vol. 1 No. 3. 1977 pp. 1-27. G. Murdock "Blindspots about Western Marxism: A Reply to Dallas Smythe" *CJPST* Vol. 2 No. 2 1978 pp. 109-119. D. Smythe "Rejoinder to Graham Murdock", *CJPST* Vol. 2 No. 2 1978 pp. 120-129. B. Livant "The Audience Commodity: On the 'Blindspot' Debate" *CJPST* Vol. 3 No. 1 1979 pp. 91-106. Page references in the text to these authors will be based on these articles.
2. Smythe's questions are, 'What do advertisers buy?', 'What institutions produce the audience?', 'How do advertisers know they are getting what they paid for?', 'What does this audience do for advertisers?'. These questions already pre-suppose the acceptance of the audience as a commodity.
3. Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, London: Fontana, 1974, p. 25. Williams goes on to write, "Unlike all previous communications technologies, radio and television were systems primarily devised for transmission and reception as abstract processes, with little or no definition of preceding content."
4. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, London: Penguin, 1976, p. 163.
5. In William D. Johnson, *Super Spectator and the Electric Lilliputians*, Boston, Little Brown, 1971.
6. See William O. Johnson, "The Greenbacking of Pete Rose", *Sports Illustrated*, 1979.
7. A more spectacular example is that of the American Football League, which was given a huge increase in its television contract by NBC, so that the AFL could compete for the top college players and so break the football audience monopoly for the National Football League and CBS. When they were successful, the two leagues realigned (merged) to assure the networks their valued monopoly.
8. Further to this productive activity by the networks we can also see how the State acts to create the conditions for the most profitable production of the audience commodity. Murdock in his reply criticises Smythe for underplaying the role of the State, and in his rejoinder the latter writes that he did not deal with theories of the State because they are "at a level of abstraction remote from the nitty-gritty level where daily the institutions of monopoly capitalism use commodity-marketing and the mass media to push capitalist ideology" (p.122). However, he correctly states that theories of the State and theories of audience commodity should not be mutually exclusive of each other. Indeed they should not, for the production and exchange of the audience commodity takes place under conditions explicitly moulded by State activity. For instance, it is the audience as commodity that stands at the centre of the articulation between professional sports, television and the State. The State not only allows a professional sports league to operate as a monopoly within a particular sport but it also allows a sports league to bargain as a league, rather than as individual teams when negotiating the sale of television broadcast rights. The effect of the latter is to guarantee that the sports audience will not be fragmented between different stations but can be sold as a lump monopolistic sum of demographic and psychographic variables to the networks.

## SUT JHALLY

This is profitable to both the sports leagues which can get a higher price from the networks and the networks themselves which command higher prices from advertisers because they can guarantee an unfractioned audience. It is also profitable to advertisers who get full value for their advertising dollar. The State has explicitly created the conditions for the most profitable production of the audience commodity.

9. I would like to thank Charles Tolman for originally raising the issue of ownership and Rohan Samarajiva for suggesting where an answer to it might be found.
  10. See Morris Wolfe, "The desperate (and sometimes ridiculous) battle to save Canadian Television", *Saturday Night*, September, 1975.
  11. Smythe writes, "The work of audience members which advertisers find productive for them is one of learning clues which are used when the audience member makes up his/her mental shopping list and spends his/her income." (p.14).
  12. Ian Gough has written that productive labour under capitalism is a historically specific relationship in which "only labour which is directly transformed into (productive) capital is productive. When wage labour is exchanged for the variable part of capital, it reproduces the value of its own labour power and in addition surplus value for the capitalist." See "Marx's Theory of Productive and Unproductive Labour", *New Left Review* No.76, 1972, p 50.
  13. One is reminded here of the debates concerning the productivity of housework. For a useful summary of this, see "Relations of Production, Relations of Re-Production" in *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, No.9, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Birmingham, 1976. In fact the role of the housewife is vital in the reproduction of labour power in that she fulfills the basic consumption activities to this end. If anyone is working to reproduce the labour power of the worker it is the housewife and yet she is strangely absent from Smythe's analysis.
  14. One is reminded here of another debate within a Marxist framework concerning the articulation between modes of production, i.e. the Frank/Laclau debate. In fact, Laclau makes this very criticism of Frank. See E. Laclau, "Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America", *New Left Review*, No. 67, 1971.
  15. In a footnote to his paper (p.105) Livant argues that Murdock splits apart production and consumption and assigns an analytic symmetry between them and thus "blocks investigation into the nature of the object which is being *produced* which includes both 'production' and 'consumption' in the more restricted sense." Production here seems to include consumption, just as consumption includes production ("when the listener buys his player, he participates in its production" (p.96). I believe an intermediate and more balanced view would see consumption as *completing* production, but being analytically distinct from it. One can give production dominance without subsuming everything under it.
  16. During the course of a private correspondence, both Bill Livant and myself independently reached this position. I am much more tentative with it than is Livant.
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