

WORKING AT WATCHING: A REPLY TO SUT JHALLY

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I

I am grateful to Sut Jhally for his critique, both in the preceding article and in our informal exchanges (see his footnote 16). I have gone back to the drawing board; back to the beginning of the debate on the audience commodity. In my contribution to that debate in this Journal, I was concerned to support Dallas Smythe against a peculiar kind of criticism of his views on the audience commodity. I called it criticism of the form "yes, yes, of course...but what about X?"; or criticism in which the concept of the audience commodity "seems self-evidently true, but not terribly interesting. Its theoretical meaning is obvious, and already exhausted. There is much that is new outside it, but nothing new within it".

I think that there is something quite new within it, but I am no longer sure that Smythe would agree with me about what it is. His very important point (expanded in his recent book, *Dependency Road*, 1981)¹ is that mass media sell audiences to advertisers, and that these audiences perform value-adding labour in the marketing of commodities. But from the very beginning of this debate I felt that *watching, listening itself* was the new thing within the media that needed attention. And this is what I attend to below. Just what *is* it that we have heretofore called "an audience commodity"?

The "audience commodity" is the talk of the TV trade. In his article Smythe cites the talk of traders, and his book cites more. Jhally notes that "network executives and advertisers talk about buying and selling audiences". Now, the talk of traders is valuable data as to what they *believe* to be true. But that doesn't mean it is true. The nature of what they buy and sell may be invisible to them, or only partly visible, in distorted form. Things go on behind their backs.

I will stick with advertising-based media here because this is the case that demands clear understanding. If we are wrong or unclear about the nature of the "audience commodity" in this classic case, we are sure to be wrong on the others. Indeed, in this case, the "obvious" case, the "audience commodity" turns out to be different from what it first appears.

II

There is one empirical fact about watching TV that a theory of the "audience

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commodity" must address. People watch *so much*. And yet they are not obliged to watch; they are formally free not to watch at all.

We need not review in great detail how much. In North America, an average of about 30 hours a week. By the time the average person reaches working retirement at 65, he or she will have put in *nine years* watching TV. Nine years, 365 days a year, 24 hours a day. TV watching compares very closely with the total hours spent by a fully employed worker working for a wage over a whole working lifetime. For TV there is no child labor law, and no retirement age. And to top it off, the new narrowcasting technologies promise more watching, not less.

No theory can ignore this immense amount of time spent *watching*. Not buying; watching. It is because so much time is spent here that it becomes reasonable to ask questions about economic value, surplus value, accumulation *within this time itself*, and not simply as an adjunct to something else. If people watched only 30 hours a year; if we expected this time to decrease in periods of economic depression as is the case with home-buying, then a theory which puts watching time at the center would have little plausibility. But this is not the case. A theory of the "audience commodity" must explain this immense watching time. Watching time, and no other, is its primary material.

III

What goes on in this time? To whom does it have value, and how does that value arise? Jhally's fascinating example of the U.S.-Canadian cable conflict is relevant here. Jhally turns to it to help solve "the most vital issue", but also "the most ambiguous and problematic one" concerning the audience commodity. Why is it most vital for Jhally? Because to sell a thing you have to own it. And why most ambiguous and problematic? Because it is unclear what the commodity *is*. Is it "audiences"? Is it "time"?

As mentioned earlier, people in the media talk of buying and selling "audiences, like herds of cattle". But they also talk of "time": "The basic economics of television are quite simple. They involve a commodity that's traded by both the networks and the creators of programs: time. The networks sell it, and the producers fill it."² These citations are typical. If the audience is the commodity, just what is it *about* the audience that is bought and sold? If time is the commodity, *whose* time? It is not only some "Marxists who balk"; something is not yet in focus.

In Jhally's example, the American stations may declare that "substitution is plain stealing". But note that it is not any old substitution. If, for example, Rogers cable had deleted some American programs but kept the American spot commercials, there would be no theft at all. It would be a gift, a gift Rogers cable is not about to give.

What is it that marks the difference between theft and gift? The theft is substitution in *time* that Rogers *can sell* to sponsors. The gift is substitution in

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time Rogers *can't sell* to sponsors. For not all the time can be sold, only some of it.

The time that can't be sold to a sponsor is, as Jhally says, "program" time. This is time necessary to "produce the audience". Why can't this time be sold to a sponsor? Because this time, this part of watching-time, must be *sold to the audience*.

This time has economic value. It was produced by value-adding labour. Its cost to the media is the cost of its production, the socially necessary labour time to produce the programs, to produce the news, the entertainments, to produce what Smythe has called "the free lunch".

And what does the media *buy from the audience* in return for the time it sells to them? It buys from the audience *extra* time; it buys *extra watching* time by the audience. This extra time is the time the media *can sell to the sponsors*. If the audience did not watch *extra*, the media would have nothing to sell.

It is in the form of extra watching time that surplus value appears. This extra watching time I will call surplus time. This is the commodity that the media *do* own, that they have indeed paid for, and that they can sell to sponsors. The media *do not* own "audiences". They do not *own* abstract "time". They own the extra watching time, the surplus time. The loose talk of the trade is that "programs" are sold to audiences, and "audiences" are sold to sponsors. In fact time is bought and sold in both cases. But the important difference is between *necessary* and *surplus watching time*. The distinction between necessary and surplus time has become more visible with the evolution of commercial television. Sponsors no longer own programs. As Erik Barnouw points out: "By the 1970's network-sponsor economic relations focussed entirely on the buying and selling of spots—mainly in 30-second and 60-second units."³

Why did TV evolve in this direction rather than the opposite way? Because spot-selling works to raise the fraction of surplus/necessary watching time. The struggle to increase surplus time and decrease necessary time animates the mass media. On this proportion the rate of surplus value produced in the media depends. The trade literature is full of studies which strive, one and all, to convert necessary time into surplus time. For example, a fascinating recent example is time compression whereby a 36-second message is squeezed into a 30-second spot without pitch distortion. This subdivides time in such a way that now there are six spots for sale where before there were only five. And according to the Wall Street Journal, "fast talkers are more believable."⁴

More surplus time. And this process will be intensified by satellite/cable technologies. Bergreen notes that: "While they cannot expand time either, they can divide it, a process which amounts to a form of expansion."⁵ In this process of determining the ratio of surplus/necessary time, the audience fully participates. Jerry Mander's young son Kai told him: "I don't want to watch television as much as I do but I can't help it. It makes me watch it."⁶ Kai Mander shows us that it is not only wage-workers in the media but audiences that participate in the production of surplus time; that is, add value to it.

This is the path by which I come to agreement with Jhally when he formulates audience labour as working "not for the advertisers but for the mass media".

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Audience labour is part of the production process of what he calls (and what I formerly called) the "audience commodity". Only this commodity is *not* "an audience". It is an audience's extra time, its surplus watching time. This is its *media-relevant commodity*, no other.

Jhally writes that it is important to note that "advertisers 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." But this begs the question of *how much* time the network *owns* and therefore can sell. They cannot sell necessary time to sponsors; they do not own it. They own only surplus time.

This is why Jhally's last sentence, just cited, lacks a real subject. "The cost" of what? The cost of those spots, of those 30-seconds or 60-seconds, the cost of that watching-time.

The fact that only surplus watching time is the commodity in no way denies the importance of audience demographics. Quite the contrary; it shows *how* they are important. Jhally approves of my break with message-based definitions of audiences in favor of objective ones. But when we focus on necessary and surplus time, we see that a minute of TV time is filled in two ways. It is filled with messages which embody the labour time of their production. And it is filled with watching by specific kinds of people. Surplus time is *their* time which they have *sold*. It will then be put to work by the buyer.

IV

Once we see that, appearances and trade-talk to the contrary, "audiences" are not commodities, we can take a fresh look at the last of Jhally's three points: the unity of the mass media. Since an audience commodity is the surplus watching time of an audience, I do not agree with Jhally that "... the audience and the audience commodity may be comprised of the same aggregates." Because we were not able to describe clearly the nature of the audience's commodity, we fell into the attitude which I earlier called "Yes, yes, of course...". That there was an "audience commodity" in advertising-based media seemed *obviously true*. That there was an "audience commodity" in non-advertising based media seemed *obviously false*.

From our present point of view, both of these "obvious" points are false. Despite the talk on the 16th floor, "an audience" is *not* sold in advertising-based media. And again, in non-advertising-based media, surplus watching time *is* being produced, although it may be sold in another medium at another time. If we fail to distinguish an audience from its surplus time we are forced into an incorrect opposition between situations in which it appears, on the one hand, that "an audience" is being sold to an advertiser; and on the other, in which some other commodity (a book, a record) is being sold to an audience. Where we see the second, we think the first does not exist. But on television, *both* are true simultaneously. They mark the boundary at a given time between necessary and

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surplus watching time itself.

Once we properly distinguish the audience from its *media-relevant* commodity, we can see the proper place of other kinds of commodities-in-general (communications equipment, consumption goods, etc.) and I never claimed that they have no role in accumulation.

I do agree with Jhally that "it is through the audience that the commodity form of the mass media is articulated", and I am grateful to him for stressing this point. But I do believe that the distinction between necessary and surplus audience time *is* precisely the commodity form through which capitalist media are internally articulated. In all sectors, all of the time, this commodity is being made and measured. The struggle over surplus and necessary watching time is the central struggle over accumulation in the mass media. As Harry Cleaver put it:

Capital tries to convince us that time is universal and just a physical entity. But we know it is not. One hour of work time is not equal to one hour of free time by any means.... Any time spent by the working class that is not work—exactly the time workers fight to increase—is dead time for capital.⁷

Is it accidental that socially necessary labour time, which appears in *latent* form in the values of all commodities-in-general, appears *manifest* in the mass media as the terrain of struggle?

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Notes

Editor's note: See *The Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Dallas Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism", Vol. 1, No. 3, 1977 and Bill Livant, "The Audience Commodity: On the Blindspot Debate", Vol. 3, No. 1, 1974.

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1. Dallas W. Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada*, Ablex, 1981, see especially ch. 2, "On the Audience commodity and its work".
2. "TV at \$10,000 a minute", *T.V. Guide*, 12 July, 1980, p. 3.
3. Erik Barnouw, *The Sponsor: Notes on a Modern Potentate*, Oxford, 1978, p. 68.
4. John Andrew, "Need to Convey More Data? Squeeze 36-second Message into 30-seconds", *Wall Street Journal*, 14 May, 1981. A limit on the speedup of producing the spot is mentioned in the last paragraph of the article: "Common sense might say that advertisers and others could save money by simply getting their actors to talk faster. Not so...People tend to slur their words when they talk fast. Time-compressed voices don't sound slurred. Another problem: People can only talk as fast as they can think."
5. Laurence Bergreen, *Look Now, Pay Later: The Rise of Network Broadcasting*, Mentor, 1981, p. 289.
6. Jerry Mander, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Morrow, 1978, p. 158.
7. Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, U. Texas Press, 1979, p. 119.