

Toward a Political Economy of ‘Audience Labour’ in the Digital Era

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Abstract: This article contributes to a political economic theory centred on the concept of “audience labour”. First, the previous use of the concept of audience labour is briefly traced and the process of rethinking the concept as the basis of a political economic theory is begun. Second, a theory of the audience labour process is developed, drawing on previous theories of audience activities of cultural consumption as productive activities of signification and adapting Marx’s theory of the human labour process to the audience labour process. Third, a political economy of audience labour is outlined. As a theory of the basic processes through which communicative capital can control and extract value from audience labour, it describes the exploitation of audience labour and accumulation of communicative capital through distribution relationships of rent and interest. Finally, the continuing centrality of audience labour exploitation in the digital era is discussed.

Keywords: Audience Labour, Communicative Capital, Communicative Production, Signification, Cultural Consumption, Dallas Smythe, Karl Marx, Raymond Williams, David Harvey, Exploitation, Rent, Interest

After nearly fifteen years of theorizing and analysing aspects of digital media use as digital labour,¹ a consideration of the specificity, and importance, of audience labour remains missing. While interest in the political economy of digital labour has continued to grow, there seems to have been no inquiry into audience labour as a specific kind of digital labour.² The ability of scholars to make sense of the political economy of communication in the digital era remains hindered by the lack of attention to the specificity of audience labour. Dallas Smythe introduced the concept of audience labour to the political economy of communication nearly four decades ago, but the concept remained underdeveloped during debates in the 1970s and 80s about the supposed “audience commodity”. In the twenty-first century, the issue of labour has been a focus of a much larger group of scholars through the concept of digital labour and related concepts. However, the kind of labour specifically described by Smythe and others as audience labour is missing from the discussion. This paper argues that audience labour should be made a more central concept in the political economy of communication and attempts to demonstrate the productive potential of that development through an outline of a political economy of audience labour that describes how the audience labour of cultural consumption is exploited, including in the digital era in which “users” and “prosumers” are presumed to have replaced audiences.

However, it is no simple task to make audience labour the focus of at least some research in the political economy of communication going forward. It can neither simply be inserted into the existing body of digital labour scholarship nor recovered from a previous body of scholarship. Instead, it seems necessary to return to the initial conceptualizations of audience labour, beginning with Smythe, in order to be able to begin anew and then go well beyond existing concepts and theories of audience labour. To do so requires dealing with a number of conceptual, theoretical, and methodological issues in terms of both communica-

¹ Terranova (2000) appears to be the first to have tried to theorize digital media use as labour—specifically, a kind of “free labour”.

² One exception is Shimpach (2005), who argues that audiences have always worked and continue to do so in their use of digital media, although their activity has not been recognized as a kind of labour. However, Shimpach does not further develop the conceptualization of the specificities of audience labour, a development I argue is necessary in order to understand how that labour is an object of control and source of value for various industries.

tion and political economy. In many ways, the concept goes right to the core of the old “political economy vs. cultural studies” debates, since audience activities clearly involve cultural consumption and signification but conceptualizing those activities as audience labour is meant to put them within the terms of political economy. Any attempt to put audience activities of cultural consumption into political economy should be done with the intent of avoiding the dead ends of those past debates (Peck 2006; Schiller 1996). In my view, beginning from the concept of audience labour and developing a theory of the audience labour process and its direct relationship to capital circulation and accumulation is precisely the way to do so. In the sections below, I attempt to follow that path through to a basic political economy of audience labour that provides a starting point for understanding the continuing reality of audience labour exploitation in the digital era.

1. Conceptualizing “Audience Labour” within “Communicative Production”

In this section, I first outline the brief history of the concept of audience labour. I argue that the early conceptualizations of audience labour provide a useful starting point for a political economy of audience labour but also leave the concept relatively undeveloped. I also argue that more recent concepts of digital labour ignore or do not specify digital *audience* labour. Second, I discuss the method of a political economy of communication that enables the theorizing of audience activities of cultural consumption as labour in such a way that capital’s control over those activities can be clearly understood as a matter of exploitation. Third, I attempt to revive Raymond Williams’ effort to theorize communication as production and incorporate audience labour into that effort.

1.1. “Audience Labour” in the Political Economy of Communication

In order to develop a political economy of audience labour in the digital era, audience labour must be reconceptualised and separated from the erroneous concept of the audience commodity. Those activities that are specifically *audience* activities of reading, listening, and viewing—activities of *consumption*, in the sense of the consumption of meaning — must be recognized as constituting a specific kind of labour and I will follow Smythe and others in calling it audience labour. Furthermore, those consumption activities should simultaneously be seen as activities of production, which makes it easier to see how they constitute a kind of labour. I will consider the product of audience activities in later sections. In this section, I briefly trace the conceptualization of audience labour within the field of the political economy of communication from Smythe in 1977 to theorists of digital labour in the twenty-first century. I argue that audience labour remained a relatively undeveloped concept in the work of the few scholars who considered it in the late-twentieth century. I also argue that audience labour is completely absent from the recent theories of digital labour because the activities of consumption that are specifically audience activities are ignored (or conflated with other activities) while attention is focused on the cultural production of digital media users and the surveillance-based production of data about digital media users.

Audience labour was first put forward as a concept for the political economy of communication in 1977, when Smythe claimed that “western Marxist analyses” had not asked “what economic function for capital” mass communication systems serve; they had only asked what “ideological” function those systems serve (Smythe 1977, 1). Smythe examined the “economic function” and concluded that, “the threshold question” becomes “What is the commodity form of mass-produced, advertiser-supported communications?” (2). His answer to that question was the audience as a commodity. He then asked a follow-up question: What is the audience commodity? His answer to that question was audience labour-power, or audience members’ capacity to “pay attention” (4). Advertisers buy audience commodities from media companies, and audience members then work for advertisers by learning “to buy particular ‘brands’ of consumer goods, and to spend their income accordingly,” ie, “to create demand” (6).

Smythe thereby attempted to simultaneously reorient the political economy of communication toward consideration of the audience commodity rather than other media or cultural

commodities and communication theory toward consideration of audience labour or audience workers rather than the audience as a mass of consumers. But, in the scholarship on the political economy of the audience commodity from Smythe to the present, the specificity of audience labour has been lost. The result, I claim, is that one of the primary aspects of communication *as capital*, ie, processes of human communication transformed into processes of capital circulation and accumulation, has gone unexamined: the exploitation of audience labour.

To understand audience activities of cultural consumption in terms of a capital-labour relation, those activities must also be understood as being part of a process of production, but Smythe stopped well short of making that move even though he conceptualized audience activity as labour. Smythe opened the way to consider how capital circulates and accumulates through the exploitation of audience labour, but he did not pursue that path. Smythe's starting point was the commodity, which in this case he determined to be the audience—or, more specifically, the capacity of people to perform audience activities. For Smythe, the activity of audiences was a kind of labour, a type of communicative labour. What was typically seen as audience members' consumption of cultural products—eg, watching television shows or reading newspaper articles—was for Smythe the work of ideology or consciousness production (Smythe 1978, 121, 125). Smythe considered the specific character of audience labour, or “the service performed for the advertiser by the members of the purchased audiences” (Smythe 1977, 6), to be the work of “paying attention” for advertisers as part of a marketing process: “[A]udience members [...] *learn to buy* particular ‘brands’ of consumer goods, and to spend their income accordingly” (6). Audience labour is the act of “paying attention,” by which audience members “learn to buy,” and thus the product of audience labour is demand. He concluded that audience labour amounts to “performing the ultimate marketing service for [advertisers]” (1977, 6) as “a do-it-yourself marketing agent” (1978, 121). But Smythe did not go any further in elaborating on audience labour. He claimed that audience members' cultural consumption should be seen instead as the work of ideology or consciousness production and then proceeded to theorize how that capacity for audience labour had been commodified, ie, he proceeded to construct a political economy of the audience commodity. Smythe's undeveloped concept of audience labour resulted in fundamental errors of political economy in his theory of the commodification and exploitation of that labour.

For Smythe, however, the significant connection between audience activity and capital accumulation was in the realm of consumption in general, hence his concern for advertising and demand management. He claimed that mass media companies facilitate demand management because they produce and sell audiences as commodities to advertisers. In Smythe's political economy of mass communication, “demand management” rather than communication is the real process that is occurring when audience members consume advertisements. He ignored the audience activity of consuming non-advertising content. Starting from the question of communication as capital, rather than Smythe's concern for how mass media facilitate monopoly capital “economically” rather than simply “ideologically,” makes “the threshold question” not, “What is the commodity form of mass-produced, advertiser-supported communications?” (Smythe 1977, 2), but rather, how do capitalists appropriate value from communication processes? How is communication treated as capital? How are communication processes treated as processes of capital circulation and accumulation? Audiences are only one part of that story, although they are an important part—the most essential part, in my view.

Sut Jhally and Bill Livant offered one of the two major alternatives to Smythe's political economy of the audience commodity published in the decade following Smythe's initial article. They explored the concept of audience labour and the value of that labour to capital.³ However, Jhally and Livant did not advance much beyond Smythe in considering the specificity of audience labour, which also left them with an inaccurate picture of how audience labour is commodified or exploited. Jhally and Livant co-authored an article in 1986 that drew

³ The second alternative political economy to Smythe's was that of Eileen Meehan (1984). Audience labour is completely absent from her political economy of the audience commodity as a ratings commodity.

attention to what they called “the valorization of audience consciousness.” They claimed audience labour is work done for media companies and the commodity in question is watching-time. They also claimed that audience members are only working during the time they are watching advertising and that only a portion of that working time is surplus watching-time, which equals surplus-value or profit (Jhally and Livant 1986, 136). They also claimed that watching programs is not work because the programs are wages in exchange for the watching-time that is work (136). While Smythe’s political economy put the audience commodity in the sphere of consumption, Jhally and Livant’s (1986, 125) political economy put their “watching-time” commodity in the sphere of circulation: “Through advertising, the rapid consumption of commodities cuts down on circulation time and storage costs for industrial capitalists.” They did not consider communication as capital itself, only how communication facilitates the general accumulation of capital.

From that limited approach to the political economy of communication, Jhally and Livant were still able to gain a crucial insight that I build upon in the third section: What they called “industrial capital” or “capital-as-a-whole,” as advertiser of all the commodities it has produced, pays “media capital” *rent* for access to audiences (Jhally and Livant 1986, 125); hence, “[m]edia capital [...] receives a portion of surplus value (profits) of industrial capital” (125). However, they did not pursue the category of rent into the realm of distribution, in which rent is one category of the division of surplus-value, presumably because they believed that theorizing watching as working or labouring required them to work within the bounds of production (ie, *Capital* Volume I), in which capital appropriates surplus-value after it has been produced by labour. They did not consider the possibility that the *appropriation* of surplus-value by “media capital” does not occur through production, and that media capitalists in their relation to audience labourers⁴ are not like industrial capitalists but rather are similar to landlords, even though they implied as much by using the concept of rent.

Jhally and Livant also produced another insight that I build upon in the next two sections. It is an insight that was only implicit in Smythe: audience labour involves the production of “audience consciousness.” Jhally and Livant did not formulate it quite so directly, but they went further than Smythe in specifying what kind of labour audience labour is and what it produces. Jhally and Livant stated in the title of their article that they were concerned with “the valorization of audience consciousness.” They described audience labour as the work of watching, which involves “capacities of perception” and is “guided by our attention” (Jhally and Livant 1986, 126). Watching is the creation of meaning (142), or “the process of consciousness” (143).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, a number of scholars have contributed to the development of a political economy of digital labour. That political economy has generated significant attention to the issue of communicative labour using digital media, or digital labour. Included in that has been a revival of the political economy of the audience commodity. However, the development of that digital labour scholarship has involved the disappearance of audience labour from the political economy of communication.

Terranova (2000) was perhaps the first scholar to offer a detailed consideration of the political economy of digital labour, which she described as “free labour,” but she did not consider the audience work of cultural consumption. In the scholarship on the political economy of digital labour, surveillance has received a significant amount of attention as one way companies can profit from digital communication by collecting data about communicative activities, which the scholarship views as digital labour (eg, Andrejevic 2002; 2007; 2011; Cohen 2008; Fuchs 2011a; 2011b; Kang and McAllister 2011; Manzerolle 2010; McStay 2011). The basic political economic theories put forward involve the sale to advertisers of the data gathered through surveillance. Within the scholarship specifically advancing a new political economy of the audience commodity as an update to Smythe’s original idea, the supposed selling of users, prosumers, or digital labourers (or their attention) to advertisers has also been the

⁴ But not in their relation to the cultural labourers they employ to produce cultural commodities, a relation of production that does resemble the relationship between industrial capitalists and their workers, with the latter creating surplus-value in the production process and the former appropriating that surplus-value.

subject of a significant amount of research (eg, Fuchs 2010; 2012; Kang and McAllister 2011; Manzerolle 2010; Napoli 2010). I argue that this scholarship suffers from many of the same errors of political economy that are present in Smythe's original theory and the work of others in the old political economy of the audience commodity. The appropriation of the user-generated content created by digital labour has also been a focus (e.g. Cohen 2008; Fisher 2012; Fuchs 2010; Terranova 2000). I define that as the exploitation of digital cultural labour. The basic political economic theories put forward claim that digital cultural labour is exploited, although there is no clear link presented between such exploitation and capital accumulation.

The work that Smythe first drew attention to as audience labour and that Jhally and Livant further considered as including "the work of watching" and the production of "audience consciousness" seems to continue to be the most difficult kind of labour to grasp within the political economy of communication. Neither Smythe nor Jhally and Livant were sufficiently specific in their conceptualizations of audience labour, while theorists of the political economy of digital labour have made audience labour completely disappear from the view of the political economy of communication. None of the recent scholarship noted above addresses the fundamental relationship between communicative capital and digital *audience* labour—the relationship that defines digital media users as *consumers* of meaning (although they are often also producers) and thereby enables the direct or indirect exploitation of digital audience labour.⁵ That relationship is the control of the means of communicative production used in the process of cultural consumption.

1.2. The Problem of Method

In this section, I consider the methodological adjustments necessary for the development of a political economy of audience labour as a theory of communication as capital, cultural consumption as audience labour within communicative production, and the relationship between capital accumulation and audience labour as one in which control over audience activities can be understood as a matter of exploitation. To focus on audience labour within political economic theory requires a consideration of what audience activity is and how that activity is exploited by communicative capitalists—a consideration of the audience labour process and the way in which that process is related to capital accumulation. Smythe (1978, 126) insisted the necessary method of integrating audience activity into political economy is a "historical, materialist, dialectical method." I have previously argued that a dialectical method that is also historical and materialist is the necessary method for political economic theorizing of communication (Nixon 2012). In this section, I will expand on that argument in order to develop a method specifically for producing a political economy of audience labour.

Political economy describes "the general characteristics of production at a given stage of social development" (Marx 1978, 224). Political economy is the science of "the sum total" of "the material conditions of life" or the "relations of production." Political economy, as a theory of production in the sense just described, is concerned with what Marx says classical political economy treats as the "generality" in relation to other aspects of the whole mode of production. Production creates the products that are divided up in distribution and formally exchanged between individuals who finally consume them.

[P]roduction, distribution, exchange and consumption form a regular syllogism; production is the generality, distribution and exchange the particularity, and consumption the singularity in which the whole is joined together. [...] Production is determined by general natural laws, distribution by social accident [...]; exchange stands between the two as formal social movement; and the concluding act, consumption, which is conceived not only as a terminal point but also as an end-in-itself, actually belongs outside economics except in so far as it reacts in turn upon the point of departure and initiates the whole process anew. (Marx 1978, 227)

⁵ See Nixon (2013) for a more detailed discussion of the undeveloped concept of audience labour in Smythe, Jhally, and Livant, and the disappearance of audience labour in the political economy of digital labour.

Marx critiques the “shallow” coherence of classical political economy’s “regular syllogism” from the generality of production to the particularities of distribution and exchange to the singularity of consumption, and he puts forward a dialectical relation between production, distribution, exchange, and consumption as “members of a totality, distinctions within a unity,” “moments” of an “organic” rather than syllogistic whole, moments between which “mutual interaction takes place” (Marx 1978, 236). However, David Harvey argues that, to some extent, Marx also attempts to adhere to that syllogism and its shallow coherence (Harvey 2012, 10) in his attempt to determine the laws of motion of capitalism. Since Marx’s aim is “to reveal the economic law of motion” of capitalist society, the “natural laws” of a capitalist mode of production (Marx 1990, 92), it is easy to see why Marx would have stuck to the level of generality. As Marx himself said in reply to those who criticized classical political economists for overemphasizing production: The task is “the grasping of real relations,” not “the dialectic balancing of concepts” (Marx 1978, 228). It is production that “is determined by the general natural laws” (227), that can only be understood theoretically through the power of abstraction. Even when the syllogism is instead thought of dialectically, with each category being a moment in an organic whole or totality, “[p]roduction predominates” over the other moments (236).

In this article, I seek to construct a political economy of communication that explains the laws of motion of capitalist *communicative* production, a theory of how capital is accumulated through communication. For that reason, I attempt to focus on the generality of production in the form of communicative production, but I also attempt to more fully integrate aspects of distribution and consumption into the political economic theory using what is useful from the syllogism described above as well as Marx’s own dialectical conception of the production-consumption and production-distribution relationships and Harvey’s development of those relationships within political economic theory in *Limits to Capital* (Harvey 2006).

Harvey (2012) describes how Marx’s method works in practice as a method of political economy, which requires reconciling Marx’s historical, materialist, and dialectical principles of knowledge production with the “weak syllogism” and focus on the “generality” of production found in classical political economy. As Harvey points out, Marx wants to continue the “science” of political economy at the same time that he wants to construct a political economy that fundamentally contradicts the utopian vision of classical political economy by demonstrating the dystopian logic of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production (Harvey 2012, 6–7; 2010, 52–53). In that practice, Marx rigorously, and perhaps rigidly, sticks to the “regular syllogism” of classical political economy in which production is the “generality” and is, therefore, the object of theorizing if the goal is to produce knowledge of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production (Harvey 2012, 6). In his process of abstraction, Marx seeks to look at the generality of production as exclusively as possible while still using “organic thinking and dialectical relational analysis” to construct his political economy (10). Harvey explains, “[t]he exclusions are almost always justified on the grounds that they do not lie within the field of generality with which Marx is exclusively concerned” (11).

In constructing a political economy of audience labour in section three, I attempt to approach communicative production with the method described above in order to reconcile the “weak syllogism” and the related focus on the generality of production with a historical materialist dialectical method of theorizing. But I also attempt to further enrich the political economy of communication as a theory of the generality of communicative production by integrating the particularity of distribution and even the singularity of consumption in a dialectical way and to whatever extent is necessary to grasp “the real relations” of capitalist communicative production (Marx 1978, 228). In order to do so, I draw on Marx’s own discussion of the dialectical relationships between production and the other “moments”—distribution, exchange, and consumption. Before I can do so, however, I first begin to put the concept of audience labour in a position in which it can serve as the basis of a political economic theory by incorporating Raymond Williams’ effort to develop a historical materialist dialectical method of theorizing communication as production.

1.3. Renewing Raymond Williams' Project: Theorizing Communicative Production

Williams is essential to the development of a political economy of audience labour because he conceptualized the “means of communication” as “means of production” and theorized communication and culture as human processes of production (Williams 1980a; 1980b; 1981). Most importantly, human productive activity is at the core of Williams' method of theorizing: “A society is not fully available for analysis until each of its practices is included” (1980a, 44). Cultural practices, Williams insisted, are an aspect of “the general social process” (44). Within what Williams (1980b, 53) called “the whole historical social and material process,” by which he meant human existence, both culture and consciousness are produced. Echoing Marx (1978), Williams (1980a, 46–49) insisted on theorizing human activities primarily as processes of *production* rather than consumption, and he said there had been a particular failure to do so with respect to communicative and cultural practices.

Dan Schiller (1996) has found in Williams' work the basis for developing a “unified conceptual framework” for theorizing communication. Schiller concluded his history of communication theory by declaring Williams had provided a necessary way forward: a way to unify communication under the concept of labour, i.e. a way to theorize communication as labour. I attempt to build on Schiller's claim by demonstrating how a renewal of Williams' project is productive in the way Schiller claimed through an argument about how it specifically helps advance the project of developing a political economy of audience labour, both by helping to demonstrate the need for such a theoretical development and by providing essential means by which that development can be accomplished.

The first of what I consider to be Williams' most significant contributions relevant to the political economy of audience labour concerns the issue of “base and superstructure in Marxist cultural theory.” Rather than approaching culture and cultural activities as an aspect of the superstructure that is determined by the base, as Marxist theory often does, Williams insisted it is necessary to reconsider the base in order to understand “the realities of the cultural process” (Williams 1980a, 33, emphasis added). Williams pointed out that Marx emphasized “productive activities,” thus a process of production rather than a static “base” (34–35). Cultural production is, then, clearly not outside the general process of production, and the cultural practices that make up the cultural process of production cannot be seen as “superstructural” simply because they are cultural. It is possible to theorize cultural practices as activities of production rather than simply consumption by discovering “the nature of a practice and then its conditions” (47).

Theorizing culture by looking at “the conditions of a practice” (Williams 1980a, 48) is useful in relation to the method of political economy I discussed in the previous part of section two. That method of theorizing culture can be expanded in a way that is directly productive for a political economy of audience labour by enriching it through Williams' discussion of “productive forces” and, in particular, the means of communication as means of production. In contrast to the received conception of productive forces as “industrial” and by definition excluding supposedly superstructural aspects such as means of communication or other means of cultural production, Williams asserted that a productive force is “all and any of the means of the production and reproduction of real life” (Williams 1977, 91). It is then possible to understand the previously evaded or missed “material character of the production of a cultural order” (93) as “real practices, elements of a whole material social process [...] many and variable *productive practices*, with specific *conditions* and intentions” (94, emphasis added). It is possible, finally, to see that it is necessary “to look at our actual productive activities without assuming in advance that only some of them are material” (94). It is in the precise spirit of that statement that a political economy of audience labour can be developed by means of a historical materialist dialectical method. A specific elaboration of the “means of communication as means of production” contributes further to that process.

Williams declared directly and simply that “means of communication are themselves means of production” (Williams 1980b, 50) and, by doing so, produced a powerful insight for the method of theorizing a political economy of communication (exactly the kind of “theoretical revision [...] of the definition of productive forces” he said was necessary (Williams 1977,

136), and an insight whose significance is missed by one of the few scholars to take it up recently (see Hebblewhite 2012). The concept of “means of production” is an already existing—and central—concept of political economy, but Williams did not attempt to determine how those means of communicative production should be integrated into a political economy of communication through a historical materialist dialectical method. Instead, he explored them historically and in the process generated a second insight for the political economy of communication: the category of “communicative production.” In the final section of this article, I attempt to integrate the means of communicative production into a political economy of audience labour. For the moment, I hold off further discussion of that simple but powerful insight because Williams did not discuss it further in terms of political economic theory.

While Williams (1980b) suggests the need for a “history of ‘communicative production,’” (53–54), I take it as necessary to also theorize communicative production, ie, to develop a political economy of communication by means of the materialist method suggested by Williams. As I want to specifically develop a political economy of audience labour, I want to be able to theorize audience labour within capitalist communicative production. By doing so, I aim to answer Smythe’s call for a historical materialist dialectical method of theorizing communication by appropriating Marx’s method and using it to theorize communicative production and audience labour with the help of Williams’ insights, thereby theorizing communication as capital and determining the nature of the exploitation of audience labour. Williams is a useful resource for one final, but essential, development in my conceptualization of audience labour: theorizing communication as labour.

2. Specifying Audience Labour: Theorizing the Audience Labour Process as Signification through Cultural Consumption

In his theory of the audience commodity, Smythe described a theoretical “blindspot” to “the production of ideology” (Smythe 1978, 121) and traced that blindspot to a methodological error. He insisted that a historical materialist dialectical method was necessary to bring into view a theory of “the production of ideology,” and he insisted that method would lead to a theory of audience members doing the work of producing their own consciousness as a *consumer* consciousness, thereby producing “demand” for commodities, while their capacity to do that work is exchanged as an audience commodity that is produced and sold by communication industries and purchased by advertisers (Smythe 1977; 1978). Putting aside, for the moment, my critique of that political economic theory, I argue that in making the connection between audience labour and the *production* of ideology, Smythe provides an important starting point that can be further developed as the basis for a theory of the audience labour process.

Audience labour is a kind of labour involved in the production of ideology, or audience consciousness more generally. Smythe provided only a vague description of it as paying attention, “learning to buy,” and “learning the theory and practice of consumership” (Smythe 1977, 4, 6, 20). Jhally and Livant described it a little more specifically as the creation of meaning and “the process of consciousness” (Jhally and Livant 1986, 142–143). Building on Williams’ (1980) notion of “communicative production” and what Schiller (1996) derives from Williams as the basis for theorizing communication as labour, it is possible to think of the audience labour process as a process within communicative production, thus a process that *produces* something. The question that must be answered, then, is what is the nature of that audience labour process?

The process I describe as audience labour is also often described simply as consumption, which suggests that it is necessary to take seriously the “singularity” of consumption, as it is described in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1978), in order to theorize the audience labour process. In order to then develop that theory of the audience labour process into a political economy of audience labour, it is then necessary to connect the “singularity” of consumption to the “generality” of communicative production, as well as the “particularity” of distribution. I attempt the latter two theoretical developments in the third section. Here, I attempt to develop a basic theory of the audience labour process by trying to determine, first, how

theories of audience activity as the creation of meaning contribute to a reconceptualization of the audience labour process beyond the theory of audience labour in the political economy of the audience commodity; second, how Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of the relationship between the commodification of culture and the production of ideology contributes to a theory of the audience labour process; and, finally, how Marx's description of the labour process in Volume I of *Capital* can be used as a template for a theory of the audience labour process.

2.1. Audience Activity as Meaning-Making

Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" essay provides a useful starting point for enriching the theory of audience labour through an integration of theories of the "meaning-making" audience, despite the fact that Hall's essay is directed precisely against the theoretical development for which I am using it, insisting as it does on the distinction between what Hall described as "discursive 'production'" and "other types of production" (Hall [1980] 2006, 163; Schiller 1996, 149). Hall ([1980] 2006) offered a revised theory of the process of "mass communication" and the relationship between communication industries and their audiences, in the language of semiotics and through the method of structuralism (theorizing, e.g., "articulations" between "relatively autonomous" "determinate moments" [164]). Audience labour can be seen in the process Hall described as "decoding."

Within the whole process of "encoding" and "decoding" in "discursive production," there is the possibility for a "struggle over meanings" (Hall [1980] 2006, 168) precisely because of the necessity for "signs" to be "decoded." In other words, audiences must work to produce meaning from the meanings they consume. Signs are by nature "polysemic" (169), and within the "connotative" aspect of the "decoding" process, signs are not fixed but are instead "more open, subject to more active *transformations*" (169). Since "decoding" "has its own conditions of existence" (170), there is "no necessary correspondence" between "encoding" and "decoding," and so the meaning for audience members is one they produce, although within certain structural limits determined by the "code" itself (169), and although it is further always possible to "decode" a message with a "negotiated" or even "oppositional" code (172–173).

While, for Hall, the process of "encoding" in the production of messages is a "labour process" (Hall [1980] 2006, 164) and consists of "*interpretive work*" (169), the audience's activity of "decoding" is not characterized as work at all. Furthermore, for Hall, "discursive production" itself is distinct from other types of production because its products ("sign-vehicles" containing meaning) take on different "discursive forms" as they circulate through the communication process and it must operate within the "formal rules" of language (163–164). Still, the attention Hall drew to the process by which audiences produce meaning using the "encoded" meanings they encounter in messages produced by communication industries opens up the possibility of focusing attention on the process by which audience members produce meaning through their activity of consuming culture. Hall took meaning out of the message itself so that an audience member is not merely the receiver of meaning contained in a message, a perspective that obviously leads to the pursuit of knowledge of the "effects" of that message on the audience, but is rather a decoder of meaning, which leads instead to the pursuit of knowledge of the meanings made by the audience. One such approach is the "active audience."

It is possible to make further progress toward a reconfiguration of the audience labour process by enriching the concept of audience labour with aspects of the concept of "active audiences." The connection to Hall's theory of the "active transformations" of meaning possible in the process of "decoding" is evident in Fiske's description of the theory of the audience as "active" in the sense of being a "social" rather than "textual" subject: "The actual television viewer is a primarily social subject. This social subjectivity is more influential in the construction of meanings than the textually produced subjectivity which exists only at the moment of reading" (Fiske 1987, 62). Further along those lines, Fiske stated that analysis has to pay more attention to "the gaps and spaces that open television up to meanings not preferred by the textural structure, but that result from the social experience of the reader" (64). The theory of the "active audience" "making meanings" makes it possible to enrich the theory of audi-

ence labour by specifying the audience labour process and the product of that process. The basic theory of audiences making meanings is one that must be adapted to political economic theory in the form of a theory of audience labour. Fiske's emphasis on "how meanings are made by the active reading of an audience" (67) is useful in that process of further developing the theory of audience labour. The product of audience activity is "meanings," thus audience labour is the process of signification through cultural consumption.

2.2. Audience Activity as the Production of Ideology

Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002) essay on "The Culture Industry" contributes to a political economy of audience labour through its discussion of the relationship between commodified culture and the production of ideology. Their theory of the production of consciousness is not a political economic theory, but it can be a source of developing the latter because it can be used to reveal something about the audience labour process from the perspective of political economic theory. Horkheimer and Adorno make no mention of audience activity as labour, and their focus is on how the culture industry produces ideology. As such, there is a danger of the audience being lost in the process they describe. But there is a crucial complexity to their argument that makes it a resource for a political economy of audience labour: It is not simply that the commodification of culture in itself produces "mass deception"; there is specifically a relationship between the content of culture and the consciousness that is produced by the consumers of that culture.

The culture industry—the industry that mass-produces culture, ie, the collective system of cultural production comprised by "mass media" industries—produces a certain kind of "sameness" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 94). The sameness Horkheimer and Adorno are concerned with is suggested in the essay's subtitle: "Enlightenment as Mass Deception." They are concerned with what happens to the content of thought when culture is commodified, specifically when cultural production is the mass production of cultural commodities. Without a source for critical thought, as Horkheimer and Adorno assume culture can be, there is mass deception rather than enlightenment. The particular concern of Horkheimer and Adorno is not, in itself, the culture that is produced by the culture industry as a mass of commodities but rather how that culture relates to social consciousness, i.e. mass enlightenment or mass deception. The culture produced by the culture industry, they conclude, is the basis for the production of mass deception, of the "ideology" that reproduces the status quo under the name of freedom of choice, ie, a dialectic of enlightenment in which wider access to culture produces mass deception rather than mass enlightenment specifically because of the content of that culture.

The "insatiable uniformity" of cultural production by the culture industry impoverishes the "aesthetic material" of culture because the production process is that of industrial mass production, which unifies the content of the cultural products that could instead be individual cultural expressions (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 97–98). Cultural production prior to the culture industry was not unified in the same way. It did not present a "false identity of universal and particular" (95), so it allowed for details to be emancipated from the cultural products of which they were a part, which allowed for the particularity of every individual work as "the detail [...] rebelled as unbridled expression, as agent of opposition, against organization" (99). Such details are subdued and subordinated to the totality of the formula of the culture industry's cultural production: "the formula [...] supplants the work" (99). The products of the culture industry thereby produce a "withering away of imagination and spontaneity" as the consumers of those products are prohibited from thinking if they are not to miss all the effects that are, however, parts of the formulaic totality (9–100). "Each single manifestation of the culture industry inescapably reproduces human beings as what the whole has made them. And all its agents [...] are on the alert to ensure that the simple reproduction of mind does not lead on to the expansion of mind" (100). To be entertained by the products of the culture industry is only to escape "from the last thought of resisting" a "bad reality," to be liberated "from thinking as negation" (116).

While the promise of mass enlightenment seems inherent in the increased availability of culture created by the culture industry's mass production of culture—"The public should rejoice that there is so much to see and hear" (130)—the content of that culture, as described in the passages above, ensures that no such enlightenment is imminent. The unifying sameness of the culture produced by the culture industry effects a sameness in social consciousness. "All are free to dance and amuse themselves. [...] But freedom to choose an ideology ... everywhere proves to be freedom to be the same" (135–136). It is clear that, for Horkheimer and Adorno, there is a relationship between culture and the consciousness produced through its consumption. Since audience activity is most obviously the consumption of culture, culture is clearly a resource used in the communicative production process of signification through cultural consumption. Control over culture is the means by which capital can control audience activities. In order to see the contribution of Horkheimer and Adorno's theory, as well as the theories of active, meaning-making audience, make to a theory of the audience labour process and a political economy of audience labour, it is necessary to put those theories in the terms of political economy.

2.3. Audience Activity as Labour: Marx's Theory of the Labour Process

Marx's theory of the labour process in Volume I of *Capital* provides a template for translating the reconceptualization of the audience labour process developed above into a theory of the audience labour process that can serve as the basis for a political economy of audience labour. The human labour process, in its simplest sense and independent "of any specific social formation," has three elements: "(1) purposeful activity, that is work itself, (2) the object on which that work is performed, and (3) the instruments of that work" (Marx 1990, 284). There are then three concepts: labour, object of labour, and instrument of labour. The audience labour process, similarly abstracted from the specific form it takes under capitalism, can also be first theorized as a process involving audience labour, the object(s) of audience labour, and the instrument(s) of audience labour.

Audience labour in that sense is simply the activity of audience members, who engage most obviously in various activities of cultural consumption. The object of audience labour is the object that is typically perceived as being consumed by audience members: culture, or signified objects created to have their meaning consumed (which includes advertisements). However, to speak of "audience labour" is actually to already presuppose labour in a specific social relation and, furthermore, to presuppose specifically capitalist communicative production. To treat audience labour as a fundamental human kind of labour apart from any "specific social formation" is to reify the culture industry that creates audience members out of individuals in the first place. The object of audience labour as "culture" assumes the existence of the production of something that can be identified as a distinctly cultural product; it assumes the existence of the culture industry. It is necessary to abstract further from audience labour to see that it is an aspect of the more general labour of signification, or producing meaning through the consumption of meaning. The object of that labour is then anything perceived by the senses and thus "consumed" in thought.⁶

However, in order to avoid moving way beyond the bounds of a political economy of communication, I return to the already socially specific *audience* labour process and treat it as abstractly as possible, but with the necessary proviso I have just made. The object of audience labour, then, is what I refer to as culture, by which I mean any signified object that anyone might identify as a cultural product. I use "culture" in the same broad sense that Marx

⁶ Furthermore, that labour cannot itself be understood as a truly distinct kind of human labour because it is, in fact, an aspect of all human labour. Humans produce their own consciousness in the process of living, not only when they are doing specific activities, such as consuming culture. It is for that reason that a political economy of *consciousness* is ultimately necessary, but that is a potentially enormous field that would encompass the consciousness producing aspect of every human activity and the conditions in which consciousness is produced in all of those cases. While that does seem like a necessary development of political economic theory, I limit my proposed contribution to it to the political economy of audience labour within the already defined bounds of the political economy of communication, which requires taking for granted the existence of communication as an activity that is treated as separate from other activities, which is to assume the existence of communicative capital.

used “nature” in describing the human labour process in its most fundamental, and therefore abstract, sense: “Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature” in which man “appropriate[s] the materials of nature” (Marx 1990, 284); “The labour process [...] is an appropriation of what exists in nature” (290). There is no “nature” in that abstract sense, but at the level of human knowledge of the “universality” of the “metabolic interaction between man and nature, the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence” (290), there is. In the process of abstraction necessary to theorize the audience labour process in the most general sense, I similarly use culture as a term that singularly encapsulates what is in reality an endless multiplicity.

A concrete labour process has as its object specific “materials of nature”; in the same way, a concrete audience labour process has as its object specific materials of culture (or, cultural materials). As an object of labour, culture is never available “in nature”; it is always a product of other human labour, which I term cultural labour. As such, culture is what Marx referred to as “raw material”: It is an object of labour that has been “filtered through previous labour” (Marx 1990, 284). The contemporary discussion of “remix” culture demonstrates the on-going process of producing culture from the raw material of existing culture (see, e.g. Lessig 2004, 29-30, 61; Gillespie 2007, 280). It is important to specify that the object of audience labour, as cultural raw material, is not, for instance, a book but rather what is signified through the visual representation of language printed on the pages bound together as a physical book. The raw material that is the object of audience labour is, in its most specific sense then, immaterial, but it is always material as part of the material audience labour process: It must always be objectified and materialized, in that it is an aspect of the consciousness of a cultural labourer objectified in a physical form, whether in spoken language, printed language, or even digitized language, which still requires a physical manifestation in order to be, e.g., perceived on a computer screen.

The instrument of audience labour is what is used by audience labour to work on the object of that labour. “An instrument of labour is a thing, or complex of things, which the worker interposes between himself and the object of his labour and which serves as a conductor, directing his activity onto that object” (Marx 1990, 285). The instrument of audience labour is a communication medium, which includes electronic and digital “technologies” but is more generally any and all means of communication used to *consume* culture. Paper is an instrument of audience labour (e.g. a book, a newspaper), but so are a television, a computer, and a smartphone. Eyes and ears (and, potentially other organs of the body related to the human senses) are the simplest instruments of audience labour.⁷ The “objective conditions necessary for carrying on the labour process” are also instruments of labour (286).

“[B]oth the instruments and the object of labour are means of production” (Marx 1990, 287). Within the audience labour process, it is necessary to add to Williams’ description of the “means of communication as means production” that culture is a means of production as the object of audience labour. That formulation allows audience labour and its means of production to be put into the basic model of surplus-value production in Volume I of *Capital: A* capitalist buys labour-power and means of production, employs them in a production process that produces a commodity that has more value than existed at the start of the production process, and can realize that surplus-value as profit through the sale of that commodity. But the audience labour process and the communicative production that occurs through that labour process do not fit into that model. And because of that, audience labour-power cannot be commodified in the way labour-power is in the model of surplus-value production. To return to the *Grundrisse*, audience labour, as an act of consumption, is a “singularity.” That is all the more obvious when it is understood that the product of audience labour is, in the most fundamental and abstract sense, individual consciousness.

The labour process described by Marx is also a consumption process, but it differs from individual consumption:

⁷ Just as, in gathering fruits, for example, “a man’s bodily organs alone serve as the instruments of his labour” (Marx 1990, 285).

Labour uses up its material elements, its objects and its instruments. It consumes them, and is therefore a process of consumption. Such *productive consumption* is distinguished from *individual consumption* by this, that the latter uses up products as means of subsistence for the living individual; the former, as means of subsistence for labour, i.e. for the activity through which the living individual's consumption is the consumer himself; the result of productive consumption is a product distinct from the consumer. (Marx 1990, 290, emphasis added)

Productive consumption is the consumption of the objects and instruments of labour to produce a product that is alienable from the producer, who is also necessarily a kind of consumer within the labour process. Individual consumption is the consumption of products in order to produce the consumer (eg, the individual consumption of food as a means of subsistence), who is thereby the producer of him- or herself (Marx 1978, 228-229) also referred to this as "consumptive production"). The audience labour process is a process of individual consumption, as it is the consumption of culture as a means of subsistence for the social subjectivity of individuals.

And yet, the culture industry in the U.S. alone generates billions of dollars in profits from its control of access to culture and from seemingly "selling audiences" to advertisers, which suggests audience labour is exploited in some way in connection with the accumulation of capital by the culture industry. The existing political economy of the audience commodity does not explain that process, in large part because of its insufficient theoretical attention to the audience labour process. Audience labour-power is not commodified, thus it is clearly necessary to look beyond the model of surplus-value production through the commodification of labour-power and the productive consumption of the labour process in order to understand how value is appropriated from audience labour. A political economy of audience labour must be developed in order to understand the relationship between audience labour and capital accumulation, and the exploitation of audience labour. I outline that political economy in the next section.

3. Contribution to a Political Economy of Audience Labour

It is possible to develop a general outline of the political economy of audience labour, as a theory within the political economy of communication, on the basis of the reconceptualization of the audience labour process undertaken in the previous section. To do so is also to use Marx's method of political economy as the method of the political economy of communication, and to draw on Williams in order to think of communication as communicative production and communicative activity as labour. It is, furthermore, to narrow that theoretical focus to audience labour within communicative production in order to look at the process of signification through cultural consumption as a process of capital accumulation. To produce a political economy of audience labour in that way is to see communication as capital.

3.1. Communication as Capital

Capital that circulates and accumulates specifically through communicative processes I refer to as communicative capital. Communicative capital cannot commodify audience labour-power and appropriate surplus-value through the appropriation of the products of audience labour, because the product of that labour is, in the immediate sense, immaterial and subjective. It is the meaning produced through cultural consumption, and when memory is taken into account, it can also be seen as being meaning that is produced at a later time than when the consumption activities occur. Communicative capital can only control the audience labour process of signification through cultural consumption, and extract value from that process, by controlling the objects of cultural consumption. The political economy of audience labour shows the accumulation of communicative capital to be a process of appropriating value in its *distribution*. At the level of "generality," surplus-value is produced; at the level of "particularity," that surplus-value is distributed (Harvey 2006, 61, 69).

I will argue below that communicative capitalists essentially seek to redistribute value from the wages of workers as a form of rent payment as well as receive a share of the distribution

of surplus-value from other capitalists through advertising as a form of interest payment. For that reason, it is necessary to integrate the “particularity” of distribution into the “generality” of production in the construction of a political economy of audience labour. As the labour involved is the audience labour of individual cultural consumption, it is also necessary to integrate the “singularity” of consumption into the “generality” of production in order to construct a political economy of audience labour. I say integrate into production because political economy is a theory of the level of “generality” that is production, thus a more historical approach would be necessary to generate more complete knowledge of the “particularity” of distribution and, especially, the “singularity” of consumption. Political economy can only deal with those aspects as they relate to the “generality” of production. As this paper is an attempt to contribute to the development of the political economy of audience labour within the capitalist mode of communicative production, I will deal with distribution and consumption as they relate to capital accumulation through the communicative production of audience labour.

While advertising offers one potential starting point for examining the relationship between audience labour and capital accumulation, as it seems to be a situation in which communicative capital “sells audiences” to advertisers, the relationship between communicative capital, audience labour, and advertisers actually points to the necessity of uncovering a more fundamental relationship: the social relation that creates audience labourers in the first place, which is a social relation between communicative capital and audience labour. The appearance of communicative capital selling audiences led Smythe to theorize audience labour-power as a commodity and Jhally and Livant to theorize concrete audience labour (time) as a commodity. But, if communicative capital has the power to sell audience labour-power, labour-time, or something else related to audience activities that is as yet undefined, and thereby has the power to direct the audience labour process to work on advertisements so that it can accumulate capital through advertising revenue, then there is some social relation through which communicative capital has that power over audience labour. It is that relationship that defines audience labour as a specific kind of labour related to capital in a specific way. When that relationship has been defined, it is then possible to understand the relationship between audience labour, communicative capital, and advertising, in which communicative capital uses its power over audience labour to appropriate value not directly from audience labour but rather from advertisers.

3.2. Integrating Critiques of Smythe: Separating the Exploitation of Audience Labour from the Audience Commodity

As Chen (2003) and Caraway (2011) point out, Smythe’s political economy of the audience commodity was fundamentally erroneous in its conception of the commodification of audience labour-power. Building on Smythe, then, as much of the political economy of digital labour does, only compounds that error. In their critiques, however, both Chen and Caraway push audience labour even further from the view of political economy. My aim is to put the focus squarely on audience labour. Chen and Caraway do put forward the concepts of rent and fictitious capital as necessary to explain capital accumulation in relation to (digital) communication, and I agree those concepts are essential to a political economy of audience labour that explains the processes of capital accumulation through the exploitation of audience labour. Pasquinelli (2009; 2010) also argues for the importance of the concept of rent. Fuchs (2012, 732), however, explicitly rejects the idea that the concept of rent has any applicability to an explanation of the process of capital accumulation through digital labour exploitation. He claims that “using the category of rent for describing commercial media and Internet practices and their outcomes means to assume that activities on the corporate media and Internet [...] are not exploited and are no form of labour.”

Jhally and Livant (1986) first suggested rent as a useful category for the political economy of the audience commodity, but they did not then pursue an integration of the relation of distribution defined by rent into their political economy. Chen (2003) follows Jhally and Livant in situating the audience commodity in the sphere of circulation, which implies that audience labour’s relation to capital is that it is productive toward an acceleration of the rate of turnover

and a faster realization of surplus-value for the commodities advertised. Chen does not deal with the fundamental relationship between audience labour and communicative capital. In Chen's theory, industrial capitalists, as advertisers in relation to communicative capitalists, pay rent to communicative capitalists for access to audiences (Chen 2003, 9–10). Communicative capital appropriates a portion of industrial capital's surplus-value as rent, and industrial capital will pay that rent "to prevent a realization crisis" (11). Chen concludes that the audience commodity constitutes a *fictitious* commodity, accepting Meehan's claim that the audience commodity is actually only the ratings commodity, a "constructed audience image" (13). Thus, communicative capital produces and circulates *fictitious capital* because it does not (and, I argue, cannot) actually purchase audience labour-power. The value of the fictitious audience commodity is constituted by *credit* generated through the ratings commodity (13). That credit is what Chen had described as rent: Communicative capital's fictitious audience commodity is purchased by advertisers/industrial capital, with the money paid constituting *fictitious capital* as credit since the exchange is a process of speculation on the part of industrial capital that purchasing the (fictitious) audience commodity will generate more surplus-value through faster realization (12–13). For that reason, Chen claims communicative capital actually accumulates *debt* through the advertising money it receives as *credit* from industrial capitalists, a claim that seems to negate itself. But, he also claims that, "accumulation of debts can appear as an accumulation of capital as long as audiences/consumers/workers do not seriously challenge the circulation of the fictitious audience commodity" (15).

While Chen generates a useful insight by employing the concept of fictitious capital to understand the relationship between communicative capitalists and advertisers—an insight I will further explore below through Harvey's development of the concept in relation to the capitalization of rent (Harvey 2006)—his depiction of a "credit-sustained television economy" does not hold up to close scrutiny. Chen claims there is no real audience labour performed (14) and so pays no attention to the audience labour process. I contend that audience labour is at the heart of the accumulation of capital through the consumption of culture. The commodity exchanged between communicative capital and advertisers is not a fictitious commodity at all; it is culture as the object of audience labour. Actually, it is access to culture, which is controlled by communicative capital through copyright and other means. I will return to that point after considering how another critique of the political economy of the audience commodity contributes to an elaboration of communicative capital's power over audience labour.

Caraway (2011) proceeds from Chen's claim that the concepts of rent and fictitious capital provide a means to correct errors in the existing political economy of the audience commodity (701). Caraway points to the centrality of rent in the exchange of what Smythe and others had called the audience commodity, but Caraway takes that fact as evidence that there is no "audience labour" and there is certainly no exploitation of audience labour. Caraway claims an *a priori* need for "a balanced approach to the class analysis of free labour" (694), meaning digital labour, because he assumes, along the general lines of the Autonomist Marxist view, an inherent process of liberating human labour in connection with the increasing significance of "knowledge and social cooperation for the organization of work" (693), i.e. the rise of "immaterial labour," the "general intellect," and the "social factory." He argues that the political economy of the audience commodity "tends to overstate the realization of" capital's efforts to exploit digital labour, which is always "contingent, contradictory, and contested" (694). While I agree with the latter point, a "balanced approach" as Caraway employs it leads to a conclusion that "class antagonism" is driving "the trajectory of capitalist development" in communicative production toward the liberation of communicative labour (706). For Caraway, Smythe's theory of audience labour exploitation is inherently "counter-revolutionary" (702) by its very claim that such exploitation exists.

Contrary to what Caraway claims, Smythe's theory does not dismiss "audience subjectivity" (Caraway 2011 705). Smythe insisted audience subjectivity is put to work in the production of ideology. Caraway also describes audience subjectivity as "working-class subjectivity," which makes clear that, as is true of the political economy of the audience commodity he critiqued, he considers the audience commodity and audience labour from the perspective of

the circulation and accumulation of capital in general rather than *within communication*. For that reason, Caraway presents as an argument that undermines Smythe's theory the claim that workers struggled to win the very leisure time that Smythe claimed was transformed into audience work time (702–704). But that debate about leisure time is beside the point of whether audience labour is exploited, which would necessarily be a process within communicative production. What Smythe did not do was to look more closely at the audience labour process, which would have enabled him to see that audience members do not only work when consuming advertisements, when they produce the ideology of consumption that generates demand for commodities, but, more accurately, they work whenever they consume culture, i.e. whenever they are in the position of audience member and cultural consumer in relation to communicative capital. Unfortunately, Caraway also does not look closely at the audience labour process in terms of political economic theory. From the specific perspective of audience labour, and an understanding of the audience labour process as signification through cultural consumption, it is clear that resistance from audience labour has not disrupted capitalist accumulation.

However, Caraway (2011) does pinpoint the fundamental flaw in Smythe's political economy: the theory of the commodification of audience labour-power (697). As Caraway has pointed out, and as I note above, "the audience does not appear as a seller of a commodity in Smythe's formulation" (697), as the labourer does in Marx's formulation of labour-power as a commodity in Volume I of *Capital*. But Caraway then resorts *back* to the *Capital* Volume I model to show that Smythe's theory is wrong by insisting the exploitation of labour can only happen in a process that fits the Volume I model (697), while Caraway claims Smythe's theory is actually a theory of *rent* and, therefore, cannot be a theory of labour exploitation. Caraway then claims rent is the correct way to theorize the relationship between what I call communicative capital and advertisers (701) and I think his basic formulation is correct, if "rents" is replaced by "lends": "The media owner rents the use of the medium to the industrial capitalist who is interested in gaining access to an audience. The rental may be either for time ... or space" (701). In the process, however, Caraway intentionally eliminated audience labour from the theory. I argue that the concept of rent actually helps clarify the process of audience labour exploitation.

Caraway is also correct in claiming that Smythe provided "no demonstration" that the audience labour process "is under the control of the capitalist; nor is there any attempt to show that the use value is alienated from the audience" (697). It is not possible to demonstrate either without a deeper interrogation of the audience labour process itself, as I argue above. Although Caraway makes no effort to pursue that line of inquiry despite his repeated emphasis on "audience subjectivity" in the face of what he perceived as Smythe's dismissal of that subjectivity, he concludes that audience members do *not* "work for capital when they interpret media texts" (701)—the audience labour that I describe as signification through cultural consumption—because the "meanings" that he views as the "use values" derived through that interpretation are "not under sufficient control by the capitalist" (701). In fact, copyright is precisely the property relation that puts the interpretation of media texts under capitalist control as audience labour that can be exploited, and is also a relation of distribution that is a "production-determining distribution" (Harvey 2006, 332) by which capital has enough power over communicative production to appropriate value and accumulate capital in relation to that production process. I will expand on that point below.

3.3. Capital Accumulation through Audience Labour Exploitation

In order to proceed from the opening provided by Chen and Caraway, it is first necessary to develop a theory of the social relationship that defines audience labour within the capitalist mode of communicative production: the relationship between audience labour and communicative capital. Audience labour, as individual consumption and a process of individual signification, is a "singularity." For that reason, audience labour-power cannot be commodified. Its product, meaning, can never be alienated in the way other products of human labour can. The situation is not one of mind control. That product is, in its most essential form, immateri-

al, but it can and must always be materialized not just to be “communicated” but also to be the “practical consciousness” of a living person, either as actions guided by thoughts, spoken language expressing thoughts, or cultural objects expressing thoughts in language, images, etc. It is not possible to own another person’s capacity to signify, or audience labour-power, in the way that labour-power as the general human capacity to create through conscious activities of material production can be commodified. But that does not leave audience labour free of social determination or even exploitation. It is possible to own the means of communicative production that are means of cultural consumption for audience labour: Both culture, as the object of audience labour, and, in some cases, media, as the instruments of audience labour, can be owned by capital. And through that ownership of the means of communicative production, the “singular” signifying labour of audience members can be brought into the process of capital circulation and accumulation. The same holds true for digital audience labour, and for that reason it is crucial that digital audience labour and digital cultural labour not be conflated in the political economy of communication.

The “particularity” of distribution is also a crucial aspect of capitalist communicative production. The social relation that most immediately defines audience labour is a relation of distribution: rent. Capital’s ownership of the object of audience labour, culture, creates audience labour by creating a class relationship between those who own culture and those who do not. That ownership occurs most obviously through copyright. But culture is not a typical commodity. The ownership of culture is determined by the specific qualities of culture as an object of labour and a means of production: Culture is fundamentally immaterial in nature, when culture is considered the “meanings,” “ideas,” or “information” signified in a cultural product, as I define it here, rather than the material medium through which it is accessed. To be an object of labour, however, it must, of course, be objectified, and thus it must be materialized. But culture is, therefore, “non-rival”: the consumption of it by one person does not preclude the consumption of it by another person (Benkler 2006, 36). The consumption of culture is not like the consumption of commodities that are rivalrous. The ideas, meanings, expressions, etc, the consciousness objectified in it, is never fully consumed but is only *used*—it is used as the object on which audience labour works to produce meaning subjectively—and it remains available for use by another audience labourer or by the same audience labourer in a repeated use (e.g. re-reading a book), as long as it exists in an objectified form and can therefore be an object of labour.

The purchase of a cultural commodity is only ever payment for *access*. For capital, it is the appropriation of surplus-value in its distribution as *rent*. There is no exchange of ownership of culture. For example, a book purchaser does not become the owner of the consciousness objectified and materialized in a book. Ownership of the physical object that is a book is purchased, but ownership of the “ideas” expressed in material form as language printed on paper remains with the copyright holder. The copyright holder is a cultural “landlord” who does not accumulate capital through the sale of commodities but rather through the granting of access to a privately owned cultural resource in return for payment, i.e. through rent.

For capitalist communicative production, the *consumption* process that appears as similar to the typical consumption of a commodity, and thus the completion of the process of capital accumulation in the realization of surplus-value through the purchase of the commodity that is then consumed, is actually the central *production* process for the accumulation of capital. Even in the book trade that seems to be the historical origins of the capitalist mode of communicative production, audience labour, rather than the cultural labour of objectifying ideas in the physical object of a book, was the fundamental labour process by which the process of communication was a process of capital accumulation. Ownership of culture as the object and raw material of audience labour is the basis for audience labour itself—it is the social (and property) relationship through which individuals are made into consumers of culture whose activities are a source of value to communicative capital because of its control of means of production. In that way, culture is like land, and the use of culture as a means of production in communicative production creates a process of exploitation that, like the process in relation to land, occurs in distribution, through the appropriation of (surplus-)value as rent.

“Monopoly power” through “private ownership of land is the basis of rent as a form of surplus value” (Harvey 2006, 73). The same can be said of culture. Crucially, Harvey adds that the power of private ownership of land “would come to nought [...] were it not for the fact that land is an indispensable *condition* of production in general [...] even a *means* of production” (73). Again, the same goes for culture: It is precisely because culture is a condition and a means of communicative production through social signification that private ownership of culture through copyright creates monopoly power for the copyright holder that can be used to appropriate rent. The appropriation of rent is a relation of distribution that also affects “the conditions of production” (69).

The communicative production of audience signification is affected by rent as a condition under which that production occurs: Access to culture is required for communicative production through the audience labour process, but the copyright holder controls that access. Distribution relations are also class relations: There is not simply “capital,” there are capitalists who appropriate surplus-value in different ways (as profit on productive capital, profit on merchants’ capital, interest on money capital, and rent) and, therefore, exist as “fractions” or classes: industrial capitalists, merchant capitalists, rentiers, and landlords (Harvey 2006, 73-74). The copyright holder, then, is like the landlord, but is also a kind of capitalist. The landowner in a capitalist mode of production does not use the land but instead treats the privately owned land as a pure financial asset (347): “in return for a straight monetary payment,” the landlord “confers all rights to the land as both instrument and condition of production” (343). The owner of culture operates similarly, granting the right to use culture in exchange for payment, thereby either appropriating value from the wages of a wage-labourer or surplus-value from the profit, interest, or rent of another capitalist. Any individual who wants access to culture owned by a communicative capitalist becomes an audience labourer, and that individual’s audience activities of signification through cultural consumption become a means by which communication is treated as capital. Cultural consumption thereby becomes an exploited activity.

Harvey (2002, 98) argues the specific kind of rent that can be appropriated through copyright is monopoly rent. “All rent is based upon the monopoly power of private owners [...] by virtue of their exclusive control over some directly or indirectly tradable item which is in some crucial respects unique and non-replicable” (94). That certainly seems to describe culture as an exclusively owned resource. When there is no competition for ownership of the privately owned resource, monopoly rents can be realized (Harvey 2006, 350), and that is certainly the case with copyright, which is by definition a monopoly right rather than an ownership right that is subject to competition.

The instruments of audience labour, as means of communicative production, have also existed in the form of ownership by communicative capital, as in the case of a movie screen in a movie theatre (and also the theatre itself). But audience labourers generally own the basic instruments of their labour in the form of a commodity they have purchased, as in the case of a book, a newspaper, a radio, a television, and a computer. Therefore, ownership of the instrument of audience labour is not a significant issue for the general relationship between communicative capital and audience labour, although it is a defining aspect of specific audience labour processes, such as watching films in a theatre. The foundational relationship, however, and the relationship by which the capitalist mode of communicative production is defined, is the “production-determining distribution” relationship created by the private ownership of culture. That social relation of distribution conditions the communicative production process of audience signification.

Audience labour is exploited by communicative capital through a relation of distribution that conditions the production process so that audience labour is dependent on communicative capital for access to the object and “raw material” it needs as a means of signification through cultural consumption. Communicative capital can use its power over audience labour to appropriate value directly from audience labour by, eg, charging a fee for access to its monopoly-owned culture. That extraction of rent is a process of direct exploitation of audience labour by communicative capital, since value is directly appropriated from audience labour.

Communicative capital can also use its power over audience labour to appropriate surplus-value from advertisers while providing audience labour free access to culture. Advertisers can only achieve their immediate aim, which is to influence the actual meaning produced through audience signification, by turning objects of cultural consumption into signified objects designed to have a specific “effect” when they are consumed and worked on in audience labour processes of signification. But advertisers do not own the objects of audience labour. Communicative capitalists own those objects. Since ownership of culture provides the owner a power to appropriate a constant stream of rent (until the copyright expires), that rent can be treated as capital by being capitalized as “the interest on some imaginary, fictitious capital” (Harvey 2006, 347). This is the case of communicative capital lending culture to advertisers, which is not granting access for use, as it is when rent is appropriated from audience labour, but is rather the lending of a portion of the objectified form of culture itself, as in the lending of space in a newspaper, by which part of the space becomes advertising space, or the lending of time in a television program, by which part of the time becomes advertising time. In return for that loan of cultural space or time as fictitious capital, advertisers pay interest to the lender, a communicative capitalist who thereby generates advertising revenue.

That extraction of interest from advertisers is a process of indirect exploitation of audience labour by communicative capital, since the surplus-value is taken from the advertiser rather than the audience labourer. I argue that the process can still be seen as one in which audience labour is *indirectly* exploited because communicative capital uses its control over audience activities of cultural consumption to appropriate value and, in the process, directly modifies the audience labour process by transforming part of the object of that labour process into an advertisement. The advertiser will pay the interest because it gains a portion of communicative capital’s power over audience labour by doing so. As the owner of culture and, consequently, the possessor of some power over audience activities (but never enough to force audience labour sell its labour-power), the communicative capitalist is in a dominant position in relation to the advertiser, who seeks to gain power to affect the audience labour process. But, to the extent that communicative capital becomes reliant on the interest it appropriates from advertisers as its sole source of surplus-value, communicative capital is in a position of dependence in relation to advertisers.

When culture is exchanged as a commodity, lent by communicative capital and borrowed by advertisers, the process becomes one not simply of appropriation of interest but of the circulation of fictitious capital. It seems that here culture is quite different than land. Rent on land can be capitalized as fictitious capital by selling “title to the [...] rent yielded. The money laid out is equivalent to an interest-bearing investment. The buyer acquires a claim upon anticipated future revenues, a claim upon the future fruits of labour” (367). It seems that advertisers, as borrowers of culture, do not seek ownership of the right to the rent that can be appropriated in the future through control of a specific cultural object. They do not seek to appropriate surplus-value from audience labour in the communicative production process of signification through cultural consumption. Advertisers do seek a claim upon the future fruits of labour, but it is the specific fruits, or products, of *audience* labour: meaning.

That brings back the issue of “singularity” and the fact that the product of audience labour is, in the most general sense, consciousness. Advertisers are interested in that product. While the ultimate aim of advertising is to facilitate the sale of a commodity that is not a process that occurs within communication as capital. It is not a process that directly involves audience labour. The only way to facilitate the sale of a commodity within communication is to affect the actual consciousness produced by specific individuals—what Smythe described as producing the ideology of consumer consciousness that creates demand for advertised commodities. While communicative capital seeks to appropriate value through ownership of the object of audience labour (whether directly through payment by audience labour or indirectly through advertising revenue), and is only concerned with the specific consciousness produced through signification by its audience labourers to the extent that, e.g. popularity yields relatively higher rent or interest, advertisers are precisely concerned with the specific consciousness they can “effect” in specific individuals by making their advertisements the object of those individuals’ audience labour. It seems, then, that Smythe was correct on at

least one count: *for advertisers*, audience labour is productive when it produces the specific consumer consciousness that creates demand for commodities.

4. Conclusion

The political economy of audience labour outlined above describes the basic processes through which audience labour is exploited in the accumulation of communicative capital. It demonstrates the productivity of a specific focus on audience labour for scholarship in the political economy of communication, making it possible to begin to grasp theoretically one of the fundamental aspects of communication as capital in the digital era: the exploitation of digital audience labour. Although the concept of audience labour was initially put forward in relation to the political economy of communication in the era of print and electronic mass media, it remains a necessary concept for the political economy of digital communication. Every company that operates as a communicative capitalist by generating profit from payments for access to culture or advertising revenue is, in fact, exploiting audience labour, and that describes most of the companies involved in digital communication. It seems that controlling and extracting value from audience activities—which is to say, activities of cultural *consumption*—is the primary way (though by no means the only way) in which communication is treated as capital in the digital era.

The recent development of a political economy of digital labour has generated many insights into the capitalist mode of digital communicative production, but it has not grasped the central role of digital *audience* labour. This paper has attempted to begin the process of filling in that theoretical missing piece and pushing scholarship in the political economy of communication toward a political economy of audience labour. It has done so by further developing the concept of audience labour, providing a theory of the audience labour process, and then outlining the most fundamental aspects of the relationship between audience labour and capital, including the basic processes through which communicative capital exploits audience labour. There remains much work to be done to more fully develop the political economy of audience labour and to make use of that theory in the analysis of the capitalist mode of digital communicative production. There also seems to be the potential for tracing a long history of audience labour exploitation within the history of communication as capital, or the capitalist mode of communicative production.⁸

⁸ I attempt both a preliminary examination of the history of audience labour exploitation and an analysis of two cases of digital audience labour exploitation in Nixon (2013).

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