Abstract: This chapter 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. 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.

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

*Note: This chapter is a revised version of an article previously published in tripleC.*
After fifteen years of scholars 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, since capitalizing on communication remains a process of channelling and extracting value from activities of cultural consumption, which is to say audience activities. 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 chapter 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 and signification 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 communication 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 in order to develop an understanding of the relationship between audience activities and capital accumulation. 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. Audience Labour in the Political Economy of Communication

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. 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. Fur-
thermore, 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 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: 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, including the concept of the audience commodity itself.

Sut Jhally and Bill Livant (1986) 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. 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 drew attention to what they called “the valorization of audience consciousness.” They claimed audience labour is work done for media companies, rather than advertisers, as Smythe claimed, and they claimed the audience commodity is audience watching-time.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, a number of scholars have contributed to the development of a political economy of digital labour. Included in that has been a revival of the political economy of the audience commodity (see, for example, McGuigan and Manzerolle 2014). 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 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. That relationship is defined by control of the means of communicative production used in the process of cultural consumption and signification. The specificity of audience labour has been lost. The result, I claim, is that one of the primary aspects of communication as capital, meaning processes of human communication transformed into processes of capital circulation and accumulation, has gone unexamined: the exploitation of audience labour.4

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

Smythe provided only a vague description of audience labour 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). The questions that must be answered, then, are (1) What is the specific nature of that audience labour process? and (2) What is the product of that 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 1993), 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 audi-
ence 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, and most importantly, 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.

The work of cultural studies scholars who have highlighted how audience activity is an active process of meaning-making provides a useful starting point for enriching the theory of audience labour through. Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” essay is one useful resource because of its focus on the active and productive process of “decoding” and discursive production, 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). Audience labour can be seen in the process Hall described as “decoding.” 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. 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.

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” (Fiske 1987). The theory of the “active audience” “making meanings” makes it possible to enrich the theory of audience labour by specifying the audience labour process and the product of that
process. 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: Audience activities like reading are clearly consumptive, involving a process of consuming objectified meaning, but they are also productive, involving the production of subjective meaning. The product of those activities is meaning, hence audience labour is a process of signification through cultural consumption.

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. It is not simply that the commodification of culture in itself produces “mass deception”; there is specifically a relationship between the content of culture, or objectified meaning, and the consciousness that is produced by the consumers of that culture, or subjective meaning. 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, i.e., 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 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” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 130). However, the content of that culture ensures that no such enlightenment is imminent, as the singularity of individual expression is subdued and subordinated to the totality of the formula of the culture industry’s cultural production: “the formula
[…] supplants the work” (99). 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).

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 than 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. Above, I described audience activity as signification through cultural consumption. It is a subjectively signifying activity. 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, and to reify the culture industry that creates audience members out of individuals in the first place. Audience labour must be made a critical concept by understanding it to be part of a historically specific process of capitalizing on cultural consumption and subjective meaning-making. It is then possi-
ble to construct a political economy of audience labour. Theorizing the audience labour process is the first step.

A concrete labour process has as its object specific “materials of nature” (Marx 1990, 284); in the same way, a concrete audience labour process has as its object specific materials of culture, or objectified significations. As an object of labour, culture is always a product of other human labour, which I term cultural labour. As such, culture is what Marx referred to as “raw material” (Marx 1990, 284). The raw cultural material that is the object of audience labour is meaning, and to be part of the material audience labour process, it must always be objectified and materialized. That objectified meaning is consumed, but more importantly, it is worked on (a productive process).

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 are the simplest instruments of audience labour. The “objective conditions necessary for carrying on the labour process” are also instruments of labour (286), which suggests additional layers of instruments of audience labour, such as web browsers, websites, and applications create the conditions for audience activities. I refer to the instruments of audience labour simply as media.

“[B]oth the instruments and the object of labour are means of production” (Marx 1990, 287). To see the objects and instruments of audience labour as means of production entails building on
Raymond Williams’ (1980) description of the “means of communication as means production.” Culture and media are means of communicative production used in the productive audience labour process of signification. However, the fact that audience labour is an act of individual consumption (Marx 1990, 290), therefore a singularity, with the product being completely subjective (Marx (1993, 90-91), determines how that communicative production process is connected to capital accumulation. Specifically, it is the reason why audience labour-power cannot be commodified.

3. **Contribution to a Political Economy of Audience Labour**

The reconceptualization of the audience labour process undertaken in the previous section provides the basis for the development of a general outline of the political economy of audience labour, as a theory within the political economy of communication. First, it is necessary to proceed from an understanding of communication as capital. I refer to capital that circulates and accumulates specifically through communicative processes 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 subjective. It is the meaning produced through cultural consumption, through consumption of signified objects. 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. 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.

Audience labour, as individual consumption and a process of individual signification, is a singularity. Its product, subjective meaning, can never be alienated in the way other products of human labour can. It is also 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, as 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 the means of communicative production and those who do not. That ownership occurs most obviously through copyright. But culture is not a typical commodity. Culture is non-rival: the consumption of it by one person does not preclude the consumption of it by another person (Benkler 2006, 36). An objectified signification 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 nature of ownership of culture is determined by the specific material qualities of culture as an object of labour and a means of production. The purchase of a cultural commodity is only ever payment for access. For capital, as owner, 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 meaning 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 by rather through the granting of access to a privately owned cultural resource in return for payment, i.e. through rent. Ownership of culture as the object and raw material of au-
dience 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 area a source of value to communicative capital because of its control of the means of production.

Ownership and control over access to culture sets the conditions of audience practices of cultural consumption and signification. The communicative production of audience signification is affected by rent, a distribution relation, 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. 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 (Harvey 2006, 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.

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 seems to be 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 (Harvey 2006, 332) created by the private ownership of culture. That social relation of distribution conditions the communicative production process of audience signification.

Communicative capital can use its power over audience labour to appropriate value directly from audience labour by, for example, charging a fee for access to its monopoly-owned culture. That extraction of a rent payment is a process of direct exploitation of audience labour by communicative capital, since value is directly appropriated from audience labour. A newspaper company limiting access to its digital content to only those who pay for a digital subscription is one obvious example of this. That is a process of exploiting digital audience labour, since it is audience labour using digital means of communicative production.

Communicative capital can also use its power over audience labour to appropriate surplus-value from advertisers while providing audience labour free access to culture. This seems to be the more common process by which digital audience labour is exploited. Any company that generates revenue through advertising revenue fits this model — for example, most of the digital communication activities that Google has capitalized, such as web search and online video viewing (on YouTube). Interestingly, Google exploits digital audience labour in this way without the power of copyright. Its ability to determine the conditions of audience practices is based on patent rights as well as technological and contractual powers. I analyse Google’s exploitation of digital audience labour in depth elsewhere (Nixon Forthcoming). The exploitation of audience
labour to generate advertising revenue is an indirect process of exploitation, but one that I argue should be understood as audience labour exploitation nonetheless. It explains a process of value appropriation and capital accumulation that the theory of the audience commodity cannot.

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 cultural space and time 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.

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.

4. Conclusion

The political economy of audience labour outlined above describes the basic processes through with 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 chapter 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.6

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 speci-
ficiencies 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.

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.

4 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.

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

6 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).

References


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