Too Many Blindspots on the Media

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In a recent discussion in *Studies in Political Economy*, Robert A. Hackett began with the question, "What is a socialist position on the control and functioning of the mass media in Canada?"[1] The answer, we soon learned, was not to be found in "radical instrumentalist" approaches (such as that of Wallace Clement, *Canadian Dimension*, etc.) which focus on (quaint) matters like capitalist ownership of the media. Nor should one have "romantic" illusions about such things as workers' control of existing media. So, where did Hackett seek the answer? In a Marxist-sounding communications theory known to friends and foes alike as the "Blindspot" paradigm.[2]

"A socialist analysis and strategy for the news media", Hackett proposed, "must surely recognize that, like most branches of production in capitalism, most Canadian media industries must produce commodities and sell them in a market."[3] With this innocent-sounding opening, Hackett proceeded to advance Dallas Smythe's proposition that the precise commodity sold by the media to advertisers is *audiences*! And so we entered a twilight zone of Marxist terminology and "vulgar" analysis—one where anything can happen if the right (or, rather, left) discourse is employed.

Consider Smythe's original argument, the explicit theoretical basis for Hackett's subsequent inferences. Rejecting what he described as an idealist view (held by, among others, Lenin, Baran and Sweezy, and Marcuse), Smythe argued that mass communications within monopoly capitalism have a commodity-form and that a materialist (i.e., Marxist) analysis required us to recognize that the audience itself was the commodity in mass-produced, advertiser-supported communications. The audience,produced by the media-capitalists and sold as a commodity to the advertisers, worked for the advertising capitalist (by learning to buy particular brands)—and, as such, produced surplus value for the advertising capitalist.[4] Thus, the worker was exploited not only in the direct production process but also at home during "free time", while watching—a *double* exploitation.

With this argument, designed to remove the blindspot of Western Marxists, Smythe introduced a paradigm sufficiently bold and unique to attract (to the process of "normal science" within the confines of the paradigm) others like Hackett seeking a radical approach to communications. Among them Sut Jhally and Bill Livant, while rejecting many of the particulars of Smythe's argument, proceeded to take the position several steps forward (or backward).[5] For them, rather than the audience as commodity, the commodity was identified as time—watching time, sold by the media-capitalists to the advertisers. The audience, compelled to work by watching advertising for a period of time in excess of the cost of producing programmes, provides surplus labour time ("surplus watching time") to the media-capitalist, which is the basis of the latter's surplus value. This surplus value, however, is only *realized* in the course of the sale of advertising time by the media-capitalists to the advertisers.

Now, obviously, the focus shifts here from the original "Blindspot" story—from surplus value for the advertiser to surplus value for the media. But, the audience still works. It still works for someone else. It is still exploited. It is still the source of surplus value. And, there is still the sale of audience-time as a commodity.

Nor would the new argument challenge the original story. It would be entirely consistent with this framework to propose that the audience, after working for the media-capitalists, *also* proceeds to secure consumer information from the advertisers and thereby to perform marketing functions for the advertising capitalist—i.e., that it works for *both* (although in different ways). In place of the double exploitation in Dallas Smythe's original argument, we would now have *triple* exploitation.[6]

The whole business bears some looking into—especially when we see the blindspot paradigm, drawing upon Marxist terminology, deployed as the theoretical basis for a criticism of a focus on capitalist ownership of the media.

Although a blind Western Marxist (at last, my confession) is not in principle opposed to the theoretical demonstration of two, three, many forms of exploitation, it must be admitted that we do have a proprietory interest in ensuring that there is enough of the worker left over to be exploited in the direct process of production. That, after all, continues to be the blindspot of Marxism—the tenet that surplus value in capitalism is generated in the direct process of production, the process where workers (having surrendered the property rights over the disposition of their labour-power) are *compelled* to work longer than is necessary to produce the equivalent of their wage. Perhaps it is for this reason that there is hesitation in accepting the conception that *audiences* work, are exploited, and produce surplus value—in that it is a paradigm quite different to the Marxist paradigm. One might go so far as to characterize this alternative paradigm as *in essence* stressing surplus value as the result of the ripping-off of consumers—although its form of presentation, presumably under the influence of the Marxist paradigm, emphasizes that these consumers are workers.[7]

It was Marx's argument that one of the tasks of science is to reduce the visible and merely apparent movement to the actual, inner movement. He approached this task by considering capital in general—capital in the abstract as it moved through its necessary circuits—before exploring the real forms of existence of capital as subdivided, as existing in competition.[8]

Let us consider, then, capital-in-general—before looking at how it must appear. We begin with capital which possesses commodities which contain surplus value latently—surplus value which is the result of the exploitation of workers within production but which can only be made real (realized) through the sale of those commodities. Every moment those commodities remain unsold is a cost to capital: a lengthy time of circulation ties up capital in the sphere of circulation and requires the expenditure of additional capital if production is to be continuous; similarly, a lengthy period of circulation reduces cash flows, reduces the turnover of capital—and thus reduced the annual surplus value.[9]

Accordingly, it is in the interest of this capital to undertake expenditures which will reduce the time of circulation, and thus the total costs of circulation. Any such expenditures are rational so long as their cost is less than what is saved through more rapid sales, through a reduced time of circulation. Certain expenditures will be undertaken on advertisements, programmes and media in order to reach markets and sell commodities more rapidly. What it buys with these expenditures is more rapid sales—and, thus, a lesser deduction from the surplus value generated in the sphere of production. The costs of the media department of this capital are credited to selling expenses.

Now, let us propose that we have a functional subdivision of this one capital into two, in which we separate from capital as a whole (for accounting purposes) one media capital. In this case, the media capital will sell its various services to "industrial" capital, which will purchase those so long as it still gains by the reduction of circulation time. The media-capitalist here will obtain its appropriate share of the surplus value generated within the sphere of production; it will obtain this share by charging industrial capital a price in excess of the costs of programmes.

It will be noted that both in this version and the preceding one, consumers enter into the calculation only as buyers; if they respond to exhortations and sales efforts, there will be reduced circulation time and costs, more rapid turnover of capital, increased annual surplus value. Whether they shut their eyes during the ads or study them astutely, searching for consumer clues, is irrelevant; all that matters is that they *buy*.

Now, finally, let us approach the surface, the realm of competition. Here we have differing, competing media-capitalists competing for the expenditures of competing industrial capitalists. The media-capitalists compete by attempting to demonstrate that they will be able to increase the commodity sales of industrial capitalists most rapidly—i.e., will permit the greatest possible reduction in circulation time. The *basis* of such competition necessarily is the size and nature of audience which may be reached through a particular medium. Thus, part of the competition of media-capitalists is the attempt to obtain the largest possible audience—which is, of course, in the interests of industrial capitalists (and capital-in-general).

On this surface, marked by competition of capitals, nothing in essence is altered. We have industrial capital seeking a means of reducing its total costs of circulation to a minimum—in order to maximize the valorisation of capital; we have it choosing among various avenues for its selling expenditures in order to maximize its increase in sales relative to the expenditures undertaken. Profits of media-capitalists are a share of the surplus value of industrial capital. And, we have consumers doing their part by buying.

However, consider the self-conception of the media-capitalist in competition. From the perspective of the media-capitalist, what it does is to produce audiences for the advertiser; what it does is sell audiences and audience-time to the advertiser. From the perspective of the individual media-capitalist, its profit is a direct function of its size of audience. *Rather than as part of the process of selling the commodities of industrial capital to consumers, it necessarily appears as if the media-capitalists in competition sell consumers to industrial capital.*

Now, as Marx noted on many occasions, in competition everything is inverted. The ideas and conceptions of the actual agents of capitalist production on the surface are "necessarily quite upside down". These are the illusions created by competition. Consider Marx's discussion of the illusions of the merchant capitalist:

> It will be completely self-evident that, in the heads of the agents of capitalist production and circulation, ideas must necessarily form about the laws of production that diverge completely from these laws and are merely the expression in consciousness of the apparent movement. The ideas of a merchant, a stock-jobber or a banker are necessarily quite upside down.[10]

To which we must add—the ideas of the media-capitalist.

Precisely because of this *necessary* inversion of the underlying relations and movements, Marx insisted on the necessity to begin by considering capital-in-general abstractly rather than relying upon the way things appear to the real actors. That is what Marx meant by science—in contrast to the perspective of "vulgar economy" which begins from appearances. That is why science was necessary. In the so-called blindspot paradigm, however, *the starting-point is the self-conception of the media-capitalists*. The starting-point—buttressed by evidence of these self-conceptions—is the inverted concept of the sale of audiences and audience-time to industrial capitalists.

In short, the starting-point reveals a complete rejection of Marx's methodological premise. And, however much Marxian verbiage may *subsequently* enter into the discussion (value, surplus value, valorisation, surplus watching-time, etc.) it cannot alter the fact that what is produced is an entirely un-Marxian argument with un-Marxian conclusions which follow from the initial premise. Should we then be surprised that this premise leads to the conclusion that audiences work, are exploited in this work and are a source of surplus value?

Let us return to Hackett, who accepts that audiences are sold and that "audience-power is a form of work in which audience members both market goods to themselves, and reproduce their labour power."[11] It should be recognized that the first problem begins with his common sense observation that the media produces and sells a commodity. Accepting this, it is only logical to attempt to identify the commodity and to observe that the media sells something to advertisers. From a *Marxist perspective* however, the media produces and sells a commodity as such only insofar as there is a transaction with a consumer (newspapers, magazines, etc.); insofar as it sells advertising space/time (and thus, apparently, audiences) it functions within the circuit of capital performing a service *which takes a commodity-form*. Within this view of the media as two-sided, providing two use-values—a product (to the consumer) and the "right" to accompany that product (to the advertiser)—there is considerable basis to explore the contradictions and the interpenetration between the media as commodity-producer, and the media as moment within the sphere of circulation of capital.

How much credibility, however, can be assigned to a paradigm which starts from the assumption that the media sells what it can never have property rights over: the audience? Ultimately, the blindspot paradigm collapses on the point that if media-capitalists sell an audience to industrial capitalists, it must first be theirs to sell. The begged question then becomes: how did this commodity become the property of the media-capitalists in the first place? What is the transaction in which the property rights over the disposition of "watching-power" were transferred from the original owners, the audience, to the media-capitalists? How is the contract specified—and how is it *enforced*? Although the ultimate test of any theory is its ability to explain (and what it *fails* to explain), the blindspot paradigm would appear to lead from a false premise to a dead-end.

So, what about the "important implications" and new socialist strategies which are said to follow from this blindspot paradigm? Some of Hackett's points do not in *any* sense require acceptance of the paradigm, and can be reached equally well by a two-sided Marxist perspective (as in the case of his emphasis on exploiting the inherent contradictions within the media).[12] Certainly his fine discussion of "objectivity", ideology and the importance of the struggle for hegemony owes nothing to the blindspot paradigm. In this respect, one might suggest that Hackett apply Occam's Razor—cut his losses and avoid legitimizing the blindspot paradigm any further.

However, the blindspot paradigm is not entirely incidental to Hackett's conclusions. Its starting-point in the self-conception of media-capitalists is reflected in his sensitivity to the powerlessness of the media in the face of competition and markets—in the "*market as censor*" ("quite independently of the intentions and manipulations of owners").[13] Similarly, that starting-point in the self-conception of media-capitalists is reflected in the view of audiences as "complicit"—the "sense in which commercial media 'give people what they want' " and thus the problem of "established audience expectations as a constraint on media reform."[14] Giving sufficient "weight to the role of audiences in the media system, and to the structural imperatives of production for a market" is the basis upon which Hackett scorns the radical instrumentalist "overemphasis" on capitalist ownership of the media (and the prescription of social ownership).[15]

Hackett's own strategy involves the creation of "democratized, decentralized and decommercialized communication networks" in which audiences are active rather than positioned as consumers.[16] Such a goal is desirable, of course, and its achievement would appropriately be seen as a victory (in the same way as Marx viewed the cooperatives of his time as a great victory); its realization, however, faces the problems (as Hackett notes) of how to finance such alternative media and (as he does not note in this context) "established audience expectations". The prospect of "dwarfish forms", resulting from restriction to the private efforts of individuals, which "will never transform capitalistic society" is real indeed.[17]

In contrast, what Hackett calls the radical instrumentalist position is part both of a general struggle against capital and also of a particular struggle to extract *existing* media from their position within the circuit of capital. (And those struggles, insofar as they occur, enable the participants to produce themselves in an altered manner—as other than audience.) Hackett's "socialist position on the control and functioning of the mass media in Canada", however, sets aside the problem of (and the struggle against) capitalist ownership and control of existing mass media. No one (to my knowledge) has denied the critical importance of alternative media as part of a hegemonic struggle against capital, but his comments on the limitations of the radical instrumentalist position reveal the existence of yet another blindspot—a beam in this case.

Notes

1. Robert A. Hackett, "For a Socialist Perspective on the News Media," *Studies in Political Economy* 19 (Spring, 1986), p. 141.
2. The discussion takes its name from Dallas Smythe's original article, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1:3 (1977). See also Smythe, *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada* (Norwood, NJ, 1981).
3. Hackett, "For a Socialist Perspective," p. 148.
4. As a possible measure of "surplus value created by people working in audiences", Smythe suggested that we compare the sum of advertising

expenditures with "value added" by retailing of consumer goods. Smythe, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism," pp. 19–20.

5. Sut Jhally and Bill Livant, "The Valorisation of Consciousness: Extensions of the Domain of Capital," (Paper presented to the Canadian Communications Association, June 1984.) Several points included in this note were contained in my comments on the Jhally and Livant paper.
6. The subtitle of the Jhally/Livant paper, "Extensions of the Domain of Capital", here would have a very vivid meaning.
7. Consider the following: "The logic of the production of surplus value in watching is the same as it is in the factory. . . . (W)atchers labour for capital to the same extent as do wage-labourers in a factory. There is no qualitative difference." Jhally and Livant, "Valorisation," p. 37.
8. For a discussion along these lines, see Michael A. Lebowitz, "The Theoretical Status of Monopoly Capital," in *Rethinking Marxism: Struggles in Marxist Theory*, Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff (New York, 1985).
9. See Michael A. Lebowitz, "Marx's Falling Rate of Profit: A Dialectical View," *Canadian Journal of Economics* (May, 1976) and "The Increasing Cost of Circulation and the Marxian Competitive Model," *Science & Society* (Fall, 1972).
10. Marx, *Capital*, Vol. III (New York, 1981), p. 428.
11. Hackett, "For a Socialist Perspective," p. 148.
12. Ibid., 154.
13. Ibid., 149–50.
14. Ibid., 150, 154.
15. Ibid., 148.
16. Ibid., 151.
17. Karl Marx, "Instructions for the Delegates of the Provisional General Council. The Different Questions," in *Minutes of the General Council of the First International, 1864–66* (Moscow), p. 346.