

Summer 7-2011

Labor of Love: Examining Audience Labor on VH1.com Through the Blindspot Debate

Jamie Jones

Southern Illinois University Carbondale, bjones08@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp

Recommended Citation

Jones, Jamie, "Labor of Love: Examining Audience Labor on VH1.com Through the Blindspot Debate" (2011). *Research Papers*. Paper 141.

http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/gs_rp/141

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Papers by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

LABOR OF LOVE: EXAMING AUDIENCE LABOR
ON *VH1.COM* THROUGH THE BLINDSPOT DEBATE

by

Jamie Jones

B.S., University of Colorado at Boulder, 2008

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree

Department of Mass Communication and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
August 2011

RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

LABOR OF LOVE: EXAMING AUDIENCE LABOR
ON *VH1.COM* THROUGH THE BLINDSPOT DEBATE

By

Jamie Jones

A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in the field of Professional Media and Media Management Studies

Approved by:

Dr. Eileen Meehan, Chair

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
June 15, 2011

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

JAMIE JONES, for the Master of Science degree in Professional Media and Media Management Studies, presented on 12 May 2011, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: LABOR OF LOVE: EXAMINING AUDIENCE LABOR ON *VH1.COM* THROUGH THE BLINDSPOT DEBATE

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Eileen Meehan

The purpose of this research paper is to examine the concept of audience labor through the scope of the Blindspot Debate. This understanding of how audiences work is then applied to the viewers of the VH1 reality program, *Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty*, and how they contribute content to corporate-owned websites, like *VH1.com*. Ultimately, I argue that audience labor is best approached as a duality of overt and covert labor.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Eileen Meehan for her encouragement and unparalleled knowledge. Additionally, I thank my family for their constant support. Finally, I would like to thank Noah Springer for believing in me and inspiring me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS..	.ii
RESEARCH PAPER.....	1
REFERENCES.....	21
VITA.....	23

Introduction

The majority of my peers, friends, and family chastise me for wasting my time by watching too much television, especially reality television. Their disregard of the programming echoes the practice of calling the television set the “idiot box” or “boob tube.” Former Federal Communications Commission Chairman, Newton Minow, described contemporary television programming as a “vast wasteland.”¹ Through his appeals, Minow (1961) constructs non-wasteful and wasteful television viewing. He defines non-wasteful watching as uplifting and educational, and claims that wasteful viewing does not enrich. In contrast to Minow's postulations of the wasteful and non-wasteful uses of television, I employ the medium and technology for a plethora of reasons: information, entertainment, white noise, relaxation, and in some cases, a night light. In this paper, I examine discussions on audience labor- how people allegedly waste time in the “vast wasteland” of television programming. Specifically, I will look at the reality television program, *Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty*, and how its audience discusses it on corporate-owned websites for fans. To contextualize, I will review literature on audiences, particularly focusing on the so-called Blindspot Debate and its concept of audience labor.

Literature Review

Dallas Smythe claimed that Western Marxism failed to evaluate media economies, representing a blindspot. To evaluate the Blindspot Debate, I engage four articles that

¹ Newton Minow presented this address on May 9, 1961 to the National Association of Broadcasters in Washington D.C.

clarified the key concepts. In his article, “Communications: The Blindspot of Western Marxism,” Dallas Smythe (1977) introduced the notions of the audience as a laborer and a commodity. The article by Graham Murdock criticized Smythe's argument, while Bill Livant reiterated Smythe's (1977) original points. Smythe later elaborated on his initial claims in a subsequent book chapter (1981) by defining audience labor.

Introducing the Blindspot: Dallas Smythe

In “Communication: Blindspot of Western Marxism,” Dallas Smythe argued that the economics of consciousness industries had been ignored by most communications scholars, because their analyses focused on the ideologies embodied in the media texts. Following this claim, Smythe (1977) asserted that audiences, not ideologies, were the primary commodity of media industries. Although Smythe initially framed the audience commodity within advertiser-supported media, he eventually applied the audience commodity to all media, without explanation. Murdock criticized Smythe's general approach, and argued that non-advertising based media produced different commodities.

Smythe challenged the modern idea that consumption is a leisurely pursuit, arguing that any consumption, including television viewing, is laborious. All leisure time spent with media was work time, because audiences were learning what to want for branded products. Further, media audiences worked by purchasing certain brands and by creating demand (Smythe 1977, 6). To explicate, audiences consume and create a demand for the production of goods, which companies must sell to ensure profits. Media companies and advertisers further guarantee their profits by measuring audience demand and consumption. The measurement commoditizes audiences, and disproportionately

benefits advertisers. However, media companies that sell goods and services benefit from their advertisement carried by media.

Consequently, media audiences pay to engage media technologies and messages. To clarify, media audiences perform unpaid work *and* pay to labor., which demonstrated that consumption is not leisurely (or necessarily non-wasteful). Instead, consumption is a component in the production process where workers pay some of their earnings to capitalists. For example, a television viewer must purchase certain basic technologies (television, digital converter boxes, or remotes) to access the medium. These purchases generate revenues for the corporations and feed the production of goods. Smythe introduced this skewed dynamic between media companies and audiences, where audiences labor constantly and pay to do so.

Adjusting the Blindspot: Graham Murdock

After Smythe introduced the notions of audience commodity and audience labor, Murdock argued that Smythe over-generalized. In “Blindspots about Western Marxism: A Reply to Dallas Smythe,” (1978) Graham Murdock criticized Smythe for applying the theory of the audience commodity to all media. Murdock pointed out that some media—like film, fiction and music—were not advertising based. These media, Murdock argued, sold the system to audiences without the added transaction of selling audiences to advertisers (1978, 113). Finally, Murdock advocated that media need to be understood as a duality of watching (ideology) and labor (political economy).

Articulating Audiences and Their Labor: Bill Livant and Dallas Smythe

Responses from Bill Livant and Dallas Smythe would expand notions of audience

labor and the audience commodity by explaining all time as work time. Bill Livant (1979) argued that the audience is the main commodity of all media industries in “The Audience Commodity: On the 'Blindspot' Debate.” To sharpen Smythe's focus, Livant identified three ways that media researchers conceptualized audiences: as receivers, as decoders, and as consumers. Livant called for a new understanding of audience labor that focused on two ideas: the construction of audiences as commodities and the work that audiences did. He also argued that the audiences formed the basis for ideological meaning of all objects because they interact with the messages and commodities in unique manners (Livant 1979, 100). However, he claimed a new understanding of labor was not yet possible, because many scholars remained blind to the economies of media systems (Livant 1979, 103).

Smythe responded to Livant's call for action in, “On the Audience Commodity and its Work” (1981). Here Smythe turned to Marx's division of labor into two categories: labor in productive use and labor power, which is the ability to do work (Smythe 1981, 48). Labor in productive use focuses on creating commodities. In comparison, labor power is produced by the laborer and the immediate family; it is the ability to do work. This distinction helped Smythe recognize that the modern “principal aspect of capitalist production has been the alienation of workers from the means of producing and reproducing themselves” (Smythe 1981, 48). To clarify, audience members are unable to direct themselves or determine their actions, because general expectations for existence are dictated by institutional ideologies. For example, a television watcher can only engage the medium based on the parameters set forth by media corporations. Although a

viewer can choose and change channels, there are only so many channels offered, and they must operate within this limitation. Ultimately, this alienation fostered another misconception, “that the laborer is an independent commodity producer of labor power which is his to sell” in their alleged free time when they ate, slept, socialized, shopped and entertained themselves (Smythe 1981, 48). Smythe (1981) indicated that audience members do not control their work. In this sense, all time is work time. Additionally, being a member of an audience regenerates labor power because audiences work to consume branded goods in advertising-supported media, which is misconceived as a leisurely activity. Smythe's definitions of audience labor and how audiences are commodified provided the scope for my analysis of *VHI.com*.

In my review of the literature I examined how four scholars conceptualized audience labor. Livant discussed early articulations of audiences as receivers, decoders and consumers.. Smythe (1977) expanded the notion of audience labor by explaining that media audiences constantly work by creating demand, and by learning how to interact with branded goods. Further, Smythe (1981) argued that modern media audiences have no power over their ability to do work, because all time is work time. To apply the understandings of audience labor, I looked at user-generated comments on *VHI.com*. I chose to use a website because it provided a commodified audience, a corporate-constructed forum where fans can contribute commentary.

Methodology

After researching labor, I initially examined *VHI.com* through user-generated comments featured on discussion boards, using those comments as examples to show

how audiences labor . In the following section, I explain how I narrowed the scope of my research and collected the data. I examined a website because it featured an accessible grouping of media audiences. In particular, I chose the VH1 website because I have analyzed the content in previous research. I am also familiar with the topics of fan discussion, because I often waste my time viewing VH1 reality programs. Further, I was already registered, taking “mcmaoflove” as my username. Initially, I approached the website in 2009, to look at the synergistic opportunities for the reality contestants. Specifically, I found that many of the reality show participants utilized the VH1 website to further their fame and business ventures. At the time, I studied *VH1.com* for its economic benefits and implications. During this research I became interested in the user-generated content and the growing number of discussions occurring in the forums and chat rooms. At the time, I made a mental note of the acrid nature of the user comments, which led me to ponder if and how these fervent opinions were gathered and used. I fantasized about the remote possibility of finding a direct correlation between user comments and VH1 programming. In writing this paper, I believed I would have the opportunity to return to some of these questions and potentially suggest answers.

Before I could discern audience labor, I had to ascertain the rules of participation. This realization prompted me to venture to the bottom of the VH1 website to gain some sort of understanding of the site. Despite my completion of the registration process, I had not actually read the Privacy Policy and Terms of Use Agreement. I simply clicked the button stating my agreement. As I scrolled to the very bottom of *VH1.com*, the font became smaller and the colors darkened. I reached my destination and opened the two,

text-heavy documents. Digital copies of these documents are available at the very bottom of the homepage, under the “Terms/Policies” category. The two documents totaled about 25 pages, depending on the word program I opened them in. I immediately printed them because their format made it difficult for me to read on a computer screen.

The policies included long paragraphs without indentations. These two documents, the Privacy Policy and Terms of Use Agreement, became my sample for the study of the VH1 website because they exemplify the construction of media audiences. I utilized an interpretive textual analysis of the Privacy Policies and the Terms of Use Agreement on *VH1.com* to assist in my understanding of the construction of media audiences. I employed this analytic method because it recognizes personal involvement (Steeves 1997, 22). I began by skimming the document to become comfortable with the language and tone of the main points. Next, I re-read the corporate policies, beginning with the Privacy Policy. After, I read the documents again, highlighting and taking notes on issues that clearly affected audience participation.

To look at audience labor on the VH1 website, I first chose a reality television program that I regularly watched so I would be familiar with the content. I opted to focus on *Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty*. Recently, the singer had been scrutinized and ridiculed on gossip blogs, specifically, *PerezHilton.com* and *TMZ.com*, for her alleged weight gain and questionable romances. Based on these criticisms, I expected the program's webpage to attract a lot of traffic, which meant ample dialogue to critique. The series focused on social and cultural perceptions of beauty. To explore aesthetic practices and norms, Simpson and her two friends, Ken Paves and CaCee Cob, traveled to places

like Thailand and Uganda. During their time spent interacting with various cultures, the group learned about different expectations and perceptions of beauty. At the close of each episode, Simpson presented her analysis and explained the malleability of beauty, asserting her self-confidence

As I watched the episodes, I took notes in my composition notebook. I recorded the destination, names of people, the tribes, and the beauty rituals. In addition, I noted how the scenes were structured, and if any conflict occurred. In constructing my research diary, I tried to include any occurrences that seemed funny, dramatic, or out of the ordinary. Following each episode, I contrasted it with the previous episode to look for themes and reoccurring structures. The following day after new episodes aired, I logged in to *VH1.com* to see what users said about the episodes on the discussion boards. Specifically, I first read through all 30 comments. I then copied all dialogue from the discussion topics into my research diary by hand. After I collected my data, I present my findings and explain the implications.

Findings and Discussions

VH1.com

In order to evaluate the website, I divided the discussion of my finding into three sections: *VH1.com*, the Privacy Policy and Terms of Use Agreement, and *Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty*. To begin, *VH1.com* is a social networking and promotional site where users can interact with each other and view information about VH1 television programming and music. The site encourages most of the contestants, or characters who appear on VH1 programs take part in the website, and interact with fans who subscribe to

the website. Subscribers can access podcasts, video content, message boards, blogs, recommended third party websites, merchandise, interactive games, and music downloads. In addition, members can create user profiles displaying personal information. These pages mimic the layout of other social networking sites, such as *Facebook.com* and *MySpace.com*. Members can design their pages to include personal photographs, videos, and biographical information. At the bottom of each user page is a “wall,” where members can write to each other. In order to access the website's features, potential users must first register themselves with the website using their e-mail address and date of birth. They are required to select a username, which functions as a user's identity in the online community. Prior to completion, users must agree to the terms of the website. If users did not check the box confirming their agreement, they could not participate in message boards, download music, videos, podcasts, or make purchases; they would remain visitors to the website.

Website users are initially directed to the homepage, which is predominantly gray and black with accent lines of magenta, blue and yellow. The entire page is divided in quadrangular shapes to feature specific content relative to VH1. At the top of the homepage visitors can log in, search the website or choose to click on the following tabs: “Watch Video,” “Music,” “Shows,” or “Gossip & Pics.” A slideshow of snapshots from various VH1 television shows is situated directly below a banner that displays additional VH1 programming. To the right of that display is a program schedule, which is on top of an advertisement. The majority of the webpage features “Fresh Today,” or popular and timely information on bands and VH1 program cast members. To the right of the top

stories, a vertical banner comprised of “Hot Lists,” transcends the remaining length of the homepage. These lists feature the five most popular links for gossip, photo galleries, VH1 clips, and music videos. Below the “Fresh Today” features is a box devoted to “Hot & Sponsored,” which typically includes contests and technological applications available for download.

To the right of these links is an area for users to browse musical artists and ringtones. At the very bottom of the website, against a black background, are four more divisions. The first category is “VH1 Sites,” and includes direct links to specific VH1 television programs. The second is “Stay Connected.” This category provides shortcuts to access VH1 on Twitter, Facebook, and Myspace. In addition, a user can sign up to receive newsletters about certain musical genres or television shows. The third category is dedicated to “Corporate” inquiries, and users can assess jobs, advertising content, partners and public affairs. Finally, the fourth category, “Terms/Policies” presents the option to read Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), the Privacy Policy and the Terms of Use. Below these many options, which are displayed using a smaller font and less graphics, are further links to: “Music”, “Shows”, “News”, and “Entertainment.” By clicking on the “Shows” link, I was able to find my sampled programs.

Privacy Policy and Terms of Use Agreement

The Privacy Policy and Terms of Use detail the rules and restrictions of audience labor set forth by MTV Networks, which operates *VH1.com*. MTV Networks is owned by the media conglomerate, Viacom International Inc., which is controlled by National Amusements (“Who Owns What,” n.d.). To clarify, MTV Networks is used as an

umbrella term in the documents to refer to Viacom, CBS, and National Amusements.

MTV Networks provides users with a document that outlines their rights and responsibilities, known as the official Terms of Use Agreement. This document is a legally binding agreement between users and the website (“Terms of Use Agreement,” 2009). MTV Networks also has the ability to withhold the right to modify these terms at any time without notification, yet they agree to provide users with an updated version. Users who consent to these conditions agree to operate in accordance with the rules set forth in the Terms of Use. First, users must be 14 years of age or older to register and MTV Networks specify that they store usernames and passwords. In addition, MTV Networks explicitly state that all website content is considered to be their intellectual property, and they reserve the right to pursue legal action against any violators. Further, the MTV Networks dictate rules of conduct for website users to follow. According to the Terms of Use Agreement, content should not be

libelous, defamatory, indecent, vulgar or obscene, pornographic, sexually explicit or sexually suggestive, racially, culturally, or ethnically offensive, harmful, harassing, intimidating, threatening, hateful, objectionable, discriminatory, or abusive, or which may or may not appear to impersonate anyone else” (“Terms of Use Agreement,” 2009).

This excerpt suggests that MTV Networks may be trying to protect itself against any speech not protected by the First Amendment and targeted by laws addressing hate speech.

Also, content should not reflect poorly on MTV Networks; it should not violate United States laws, contain malicious programs, or be used for profiteering. All of the posts and contributions to the VH1 online community are the responsibility of the

individual user. Website users, through their compliance, accept any and all consequences, including financial ramifications, stemming from a post. Also, MTV Networks maintains the right to remove a post, refuse certain users to post, and revoke website privileges in their entirety. The act of posting signifies that users authorize MTV Networks to posts in their original or partial form. Further, postings should adhere to the content specifications set forth earlier. The policy also addresses the limitations of the Terms of Use Agreement. In this section, MTV Networks explain that all content provided on the website is done so on an “as is” basis, and there is no guarantee that it will be available. Also, MTV Networks clarify that users fully assume the risk associated with the VH1 website. However, a discussion of the potential risks is not included. Finally, the Terms of Use conclude by mandating that this agreement “supersedes any and all prior or inconsistent understandings relating to the Site and your use of the Site” (“Terms of Use Agreement,” 2009). MTV Networks constructs their audiences by restricting the age of users and the content of their postings.

The “Privacy Policy,” which was last updated in October 2009, states that it is only applicable to “Personal Information” and “Other Information,” which are defined later. The extensive document claims that the website stores “personal information” including “information that would allow someone to identify you or contact you, such as full name, postal address, e-mail address or telephone number.” Other information, includes any information provided by the user, but could potentially include credit card information and website activity. According to the VH1 policy, “By visiting the Site, whether as a registered user or otherwise, you acknowledge, understand and hereby agree

that you are giving us your consent to track your activities and your use of the Site" ("Privacy Policy," 2009). Specifically, the site tracks behavior through the use of cookies or web beacons ("Privacy Policy," 2009). The accumulated information is available to Viacom, which owns MTV Networks, and National Amusements, the parent company of Viacom and CBS. Further, the information is available to all of CBS and Viacom's subsidiary holdings, which include radio stations, publishing houses and film production companies. Third party websites can also obtain information on audience behavior for business purposes. The information is collected through registration processes, marketing or promotional e-mails, content provided by users for the website (i.e. comments on discussion boards), and through other, undefined practices to "maintain and administer the Site" ("Privacy Policy," 2009).

Records of such are used in a number of ways, including, tracking the number of unique webpage views, accumulating statistical information about user activity, and "determining which features, webpages, products and services users like best to, among other things, help us operate the Site, enhance and improve our services and the Site and display advertising and marketing information" ("Privacy Policy," 2009). MTV Networks also claim that information is collected to construct a personalized website experience, by which it means that viewers will be exposed to targeted advertising. Based on the combination of demographics (age, gender, geography) and website behavior, the network exposes specifically targeted advertisements.. If users do not seek a personalized advertising experience, they may opt-out and disable the "Third Party Advertising Service Providers' Tracking Technologies" ("Privacy Policy," 2009). However, if users

delete these technologies, certain website features will not function properly. *VH1.com* users can also receive relevant information by syncing their wireless technologies to the site, which allows MTV Networks to distribute information directly to the consumer. Although these technologies appear to personalize the experience, they actually function to commodify audience labor and behaviors by providing specific information to advertisers, ultimately providing third-party sites with optimal consumers.

The information that is collected regarding website users is “generally” not sold, rented, leased or disclosed to third parties without consent (“Privacy Policy,” 2009). However, findings can be released to third parties to assist in the administration and maintenance of the website. MTV Networks provide a list of instances when personal information can be released. Personal information can be provided to third parties if MTV Networks are subpoenaed by a governmental agency, or believe users are violating laws, or for the purpose of promotions, and in the event of bankruptcy or mergers. In the event of bankruptcies or mergers, the decision will be made by National Amusements, not Viacom. Finally, the network maintains sole discretion to disclose personal information if deemed “necessary or appropriate” (“Privacy Policy,” 2009). Finally, the privacy policy concludes by stating that no internet transmission is absolutely protected, despite the use of appropriate safeguards. MTV Networks recommended that users exhibit discretion in the protection of their information, which is impossible.

I assert that the Privacy Policy and Terms of Use Agreement created the conditions and constraints for audiences to labor on *VH1.com*. In addition, the two documents outlined the measurement and sale of audience members, thus commodifying

them. In the Privacy Policy and Terms of Use Agreement, MTV Networks explains that certain offensive language is prohibited, and will be removed at their discretion, without warning or explanation. These rules are enforced by website moderators, known to the site as “VH1Admin.” Further, anyone who posts to the website relinquishes ownership over their contributions, forfeiting control to MTV Networks. *VH1.com* users pay to engage the website, and labor for MTV Networks, without compensation. The two documents literally construct an agreeable arena for audience participation and labor to occur. However, the website merely functions as the “free lunch,” a place where audiences do work that benefits advertisers and transforms audience members into saleable goods, or commodities. As described in the documents, audience behavior is monitored and molded into quantifiable masses based on demographics and biographical information acquired during the registration process. These masses are then sold to advertisers, which use the information to more accurately target consumers.

VH1.com is marketed to VH1 viewers as a place where fans can unite and freely discuss television programs, music, and entertainment news. Specifically, the website features individual webpages dedicated to programs airing on VH1. Users are often directed to these pages during televised VH1 programs as a way to find more information and interact with other fans. For the purpose of this paper, I examined *Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty* and its *VH1.com* webpage in order to look at how audiences labor. I found that users most often post reactions to the program, and the criticisms of Jessica Simpson. Their articulations often engage episodes, contemporary critiques of Simpson, and other users' postings. In the following section, I evaluate the webpage for *Jessica*

Simpson: The Price of Beauty, and then look at three specific user comments that demonstrate the most prominent posts.

Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty

After I evaluated the conditions for audience labor, I looked at audience labor in the form of user-generated content regarding *Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty*, a reality program that depicted Jessica Simpson's examination of beauty in different cultures. VH1 aired 30-minute episodes from March 15, 2010 to May 3, 2010. The program, which was styled like a documentary, showed her traveling with friends, CaCee Cobb and Ken Paves. The episodes featured Simpson engaging in beauty regimens that were unique to certain cultures. For example, Simpson, Cobb and Paves traveled to France, where they bathed in wine, which is believed to soften the skin. Her adventures were cut with personal interviews, where Simpson elaborated on her thoughts and feelings ("Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty, 2010). I chose to first examine the specific page for *Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty*. Following, I investigated user comments.

This particular page is simpler than the main webpage. The background features an all white background, and it is headed with a horizontal banner containing the show's title, along with a picture of Jessica Simpson. Above the banner are rectangular tabs where users can see the number of: members, discussions, videos, photos, and links. Text appears below that states the page is founded by VH1Admin, the site moderator. User messages populate the remainder of the webpage. In this section, website users can post individual comments regarding the show, or they can originate a discussion thread, which

invites other users to participate to form a dialogue. For example, the reality program, *Jessica Simpson's The Price of Beauty* has 44 members and zero discussion threads.

However, website users wrote 30 personal comments and critiques.

VH1.com members, n.tonks, janderson178 and Bridget exemplify some of the defensive audience feedback. The three contributions addressed a conflict from the fifth episode of the season where Simpson, Paves and Cobb travel to Morocco. During this trip, Jessica was criticized by a family of Moroccan women for showing too much skin. Specifically, Simpson was instructed to interview three generations of Muslim women on their dress. The first woman was completely covered and veiled, revealing only her eyes. The middle woman wore fabric from head-to-toe; however, her face is visible. The third woman wore jeans and a striped top with three-quarter length sleeves, and a scooped neck. On the other side of the discussion table, Simpson donned a loose purple tunic and short denim cut-offs. The women felt that Simpson's attire was offensive to their culture. However, she defended herself and her right to show certain body parts, asserting that those three women had no right to judge her (“Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty, 2010). Finally, Simpson concluded the segment by claiming that her experience built her confidence. Three users engaged and responded to the conflict:

n.tonks: I totally agree with tsassy12, she is not fat! Anyone know why tonight's episode in Morocco (pardon my spelling) was on earlier today??? And what about that chicky with all the cleavage showing then telling Jessica she was dressed inappropriately??? Pot calling the kettle black! (“Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty, 2010).

Bridget: Jessica did a wonderful job of both standing up for herself and being a gracious guest with a woman determine to attack her. While the outfit was

inappropriate it was not in any way worth the drama. As for the eating of the brains, which one of us would not protest at this task if laid before us. It is an excellent chance to see how the rest of the world see beauty compared to us. Enjoy the experience and don't take it so seriously ("Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty, 2010).

janderson178: I think Jessica is doing an amazing job. I loved every episode so far and I'm sure I'll love every episode to come. I think what Jess is doing is great and we should stop hating on her so much and see the good she is trying to do. We all wonder why there's so much hate in the world, well read your own comments and I think you'll see that you're all bringing so much hate into the world. At least Jessica is trying to show the world some love. Go Jess! Keep your head up girl! You're amazing! ("Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty, 2010).

Janderson178 commended Jessica Simpson and her reality program. She also asked that people treat Jessica more kindly. Further, janderson178 explained that the user-comments reflect and perpetuated hatred. The examples of fan discussion from the webpage for *Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty* demonstrated the nuances of audience labor. Additionally, they best represented the type of defensive commentary most often seen on the webpage. However, I did not evaluate the content of user-generated posts, I merely focused on their existence.

The commentary illustrated the complexities of audience labor because it showed that audiences labored on multiple levels. First, audiences labored by watching the television programs, and then by engaging the television shows on the website. In addition, these audiences further labored by completing the registration policies, which collect and measure biographical information. VH1 users are a commodity because they agreed to the Terms of Use Agreement and Privacy Policy, which stated that audience behavior will be sold and measured depending on a variety of circumstances. Users are

reduced to a number, which is then sold to advertisers. Finally, *Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty* exemplified Smythe's (1977) concept of the “free lunch,” because it simply functions as the vehicle to bring viewers to the advertisements. As viewers waste time with the free reality content, their information and activity are commoditized.

Conclusion

In order to research the VH1 website, I analyzed the Terms of Use Agreement, the Privacy Policy and the user-generated comments on discussion threads for the reality program, *Jessica Simpson: The Price of Beauty*. I informed my analysis with an understanding of audience labor and the audience commodity based on Smythe, Murdock, and Livant's writings. MTV Networks presented the Terms of Use Agreement and the Privacy Policy to discuss regulations and expectations of audience behavior on *VH1.com*. Additionally, these documents explained how audience behavior is measured and when MTV Networks sells this information.

These documents demonstrated Smythe's notion of the audience commodity because MTV Networks measured and sold its audiences. Further, MTV Networks constructed the website's audiences to be more appealing and accessible to advertisers. For example, when users register with the website, they are required to include their name, age, gender and e-mail address. Once this information is cross listed with website behavior, advertisers can choose their optimal audience and the most profitable way to target them. Advertisers are now better acquainted with their desired demographic, and they are able to reach them with fewer distractions. The VH1 website and the web users' contributions exhibit audience labor, because audience members watched the program

and created unique content on the website. In addition, the website and the posts, function like Smythe's (1977) notion of the “free lunch.” The user-generated comments on *VH1.com* merely function to attract audiences to witness the advertisements, and have their behavior tracked. VH1 web users are consistently exposed to advertisements and branded goods, teaching people how to consume, and reinforcing Smythe's idea that all time is work time.

An analysis of *VH1.com* enlightened the concept of audience work and the audience commodity, exemplifying how media audiences perform free labor under the guise of wasting time. After completing my analysis and evaluating my findings, I argue that audience labor is best approached as a duality of overt and covert labor. The overt labor represents the activity of turning on the television and watching the content (and advertisements). Alternatively, the covert labor is the work that audiences do not realize they do. Mindless activities, like “surfing the web” or “channel surfing,” may seem innocuous to audiences; however, audience members are laboring. When audience members navigate a website and click on random hyperlinks of interest, their behavior is monitored, and they are doing unpaid work for advertisers. This understanding of labor as a duality reifies Smythe's notion that all time is labor time. Ultimately, there is no wasted time when viewing media.

REFERENCES

- Columbia Journalism Review. (n.d.). Who owns what. Retrieved from <http://www.cjr.org/resources/?c=viacom>
- Jhally, Sut. (1989). The political economy of culture. In Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (Eds.), *Politics in contemporary America* (pp. 65-81). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Livant, Bill.(1979). The audience commodity: on the “blindspot” debate. *Canadian Journal Of Political and Social Theory*, 3(1), 91-106.
- Meehan, E.R. (1993). Commodity audience, actual audience: the blindspot debate. In Vincent Mosco, Manjunath Pendakur, & Janet Wasko (eds.), *Illuminating the blindspots: essays honoring Dallas Smythe* (pp. 378-397). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Meehan, E.R. (2000). Leisure or labor?: fan ethnography and political economy. In Ingunn Hagen & Janet Wasko (eds.), *Consuming audiences?: production and reception in media research* (pp.71-92). New Jersey: Hampton Press.
- Meehan, E.R. (2005). *Star Trek*, Synergy, and the Transindustrialization of Tribbles. In *Why TV is not our fault: television programming, viewers, and who’s really in control* (pp. 89-116). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Mosco, V. (2009). Commodification: content, audiences, labor. In *The political economy of communication* (pp. 127-156). California: Sage Publications, Ltd.
- MTV Networks. (n.d.). Jessica Simpson's: The Price of Beauty. *VH1*. Retrieved from community.vh1.com/groups/Jessica_Simpson_The_Price_of_Beauty
- MTV Networks. (n.d.). Top 20, TV Shows, Celebrity News, Music Videos, Photos, TV

Schedule- VH1. *Top 20, TV Shows, Celebrity News, Music Videos, Photos, TV Schedule-VH1*. Retrieved from <http://www.vh1.com/>

MTV Networks. (2009, October 19). VH1.com: Terms- Privacy Policy and Your Rights, Personal Information, Member Registration. *Top 20, TV Shows, Celebrity News, Music Videos, Photos, TV Schedule-VH1*. Retrieved from <http://www.vh1.com/interact/terms/>

MTV Networks. (2009, October 19). VH1.com: Terms- Privacy Policy and Your Rights, Personal Information, Member Registration. *Privacy Policy and Your California Privacy Rights*. Retrieved from <http://www.vh1.com/interact/terms/privacy.jhtml>

Murdock, G. (1978). Blindspots about western marxism: a reply to Dallas Smythe. *Canadian Journal Of Political and Social Theory*, 2(2), 109-118.

Shimpach, Shawn (2005). "Working Watching: The Creative and Cultural Labor of the Media Audience," *Social Semiotics*, 15(3), 343-360.

Smythe, Dallas (1977). Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism. *Canadian Journal Of Political and Social Theory*, 1(3), 1-27.

Smythe, Dallas (1981). On the Audience Commodity and Its Work. In *Dependency road: Communication, capitalism, consciousness & Canada* (pp.22-51). New Jersey: Ablex Publishing.

Steeves, H. Leslie. (1997). Interpreting press accounts. In *Gender violence and the press: The St. Kizito story* (pp. 22-41). Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

VITA
Graduate School
Southern Illinois University

Jamie Jones

jbjones08@gmail.com

University of Colorado at Boulder
Bachelor of Science, Media Studies, May 2008

Research Paper:

Labor of Love: Examining Audience Labor on VH1.com Through the Blindspot
Debate

Major Professor: Dr. Eileen Meehan