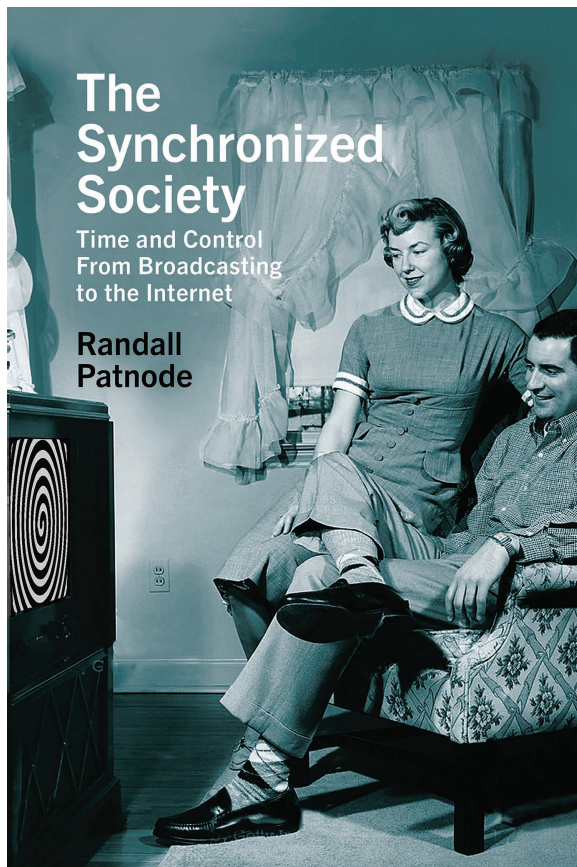# Book Review:

Patnode, Randall. *The Synchronized Society: Time and Control from Broadcasting to the Internet* (Rutgers University Press, 2023)

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Common wisdom across the television industry held that sports programming would be the final bulwark against the erosion of the linear television audience because liveness was essential to sports spectatorship. Watching a game once the outcome has been decided is a very different activity than the communal experience of watching a game live while rooting for the home team alongside fellow fans in one's living room or across social media. As streaming platforms increasingly purchase the media rights to sports leagues and programming, the social synchronicity that sports programming facilitated is becoming disrupted, partitioned, and individualized. Still, the desire for this synchronous experience persists and has broken most streaming platforms' records for simultaneous viewers.[2] The question of where this desire for synchronous viewing experiences emerges from and the reason for its persistence in the face of customizable on-demand digital technology is answered in Randall Patnode's *The Synchronized Society: Time and Control from Broadcasting to the Internet*.

Television's ability to bring audiences together via simultaneous broadcasts has been a defining feature of theories about the medium. Indeed, the role radio and television have played in nation building and in creating the "citizen audience"[3] that comes together to engage in a "cultural forum"[4] for debates about the issues of the day are fundamental to television studies syllabi. Patnode rightly situates broadcasting technologies' emergence alongside Fordism, Taylorism, and the Progressive era as instrumental in reshaping the rhythms of everyday life, including the standardization of the five-day work week and the eight-hour workday. Programs, advertisements, and interstitials "flow"[5] together to create program segments or "super-texts,"[6] which indicate the intended audience and the way that audience is encouraged to spend their time at any given moment of the day. Patnode is an accomplished media historian, well aware of this technology's development, and his dedication to understanding how emerging media technologies have been presented and sold to the public is evident across his publications.

Patnode clearly enjoys the history of twentieth-century mass media culture and has produced a breezy retelling of this history, emphasizing the way technologies like television have helped to define the meaning of time and a person's relationship to a schedule. Patnode's boldest claim is that media technologies' relationship to time had an outsized influence in our understanding of labor. Media scholars such as Eileen Meehan[7] and Dallas Smythe[8] have established that the audience is the currency or commodity for programmers and networks in the commercial media industries. Patnode grasps on to this common understanding and points our attention to the way that the audience's *time* is specifically the currency that is being exchanged. He provides an "account of broadcasting less as a message delivery system and more as a time manager" in which labor for leisure was first defined in terms of units of time. The practice of setting aside time to work on one's hobbies, past-times, and screen media programs continues into the digital age. Patnode's insistence on the continuity of hidden audience labor into the digital age evokes similar work by Kylie Jarrett,[9] which uses feminist theories of domestic labor to argue for the ways that the audience's time is essential for the creation of surplus on the internet and the broader maintenance of regimes of exploitation. Patnode notes that in the digital era the efficiencies espoused by Taylorism have come to define one's experience of the internet and social media. Online audiences trust search engines to provide the most efficient return on investment for their stolen moments of leisure. These mini-breaks for entertainment are made possible by algorithms and mobile devices, which provide short-form content (or long form content which can be played on 2× speed). These offerings can be endlessly scrolled or indefinitely paused to allow for multi-tasking one's leisure work and employment responsibilities throughout the day. For Patnode, modern media technologies allow for simultaneous demands on our time, from our first job, employment, and our second job, consumption.

Whereas Michele Hilmes's *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*[10] provides an accessible guide through broadcast history, Patnode's *The Synchronized Society* provides a way of talking about that history that emphasizes the audience's status as laborers. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 takes us all the way back to ancient Rome, opening with a delightful quote about the oppressiveness of sundials, and continues into the industrial era to track the development of time consciousness. Chapter 3, "Roots of the Synchronized Society," would pair nicely with Derek Kompare's "Industrializing Culture" chapter in *Rerun Nation*,[11] as both provide accessible examples of the ways modern history

has shaped fundamental truths of our contemporary media eras, such as the creation of the rhythms of "standard time" and the proliferation and effects of mass-produced culture, respectively. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 provide a history of the development of commercial radio, including examples of radio programs from the golden age that taught the radio listener, like the assembly line worker before them, to accept the temporal flow. Chapters 7, 8, and 9 discuss the emergence of television, remote controls, cable television, and time-shifting technologies like VCRs and DVRs. Across these chapters, Patnode describes the way the television audience learned to be efficient with their leisure time, planning ahead and making time for their viewing labor so that they could get the most pleasure for their efforts and earn the cultural capital most useful to their social circles. Chapters 10 and 11 detail the way the internet and digital technologies push the desire for efficient uses of leisure time to a new level via examinations of search engines, social media platforms, and digital devices.

If you are like me and you enjoy a cultural history that centers on a particular cultural object and its influence on modern life, Patnode's book will certainly appeal to you. This work would benefit undergraduate instructors who are looking to incorporate cultural histories into their media history courses. There are constant reminders across the book that the ways we engage with entertainment and media technology have more continuity with the past than typically assumed, given the claims of innovation and transformation that are used to sell us these products. The common denominator is that time devoted has become equal to the measure of labor and dedication. This equation has its roots in industrialization and has been reinforced throughout the decades and continuing into the digital media era.

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[2] Spangler, Todd. "Peacock's Streaming-Only NFL Wild Card Game Drove Record 2.8 Million Sign-Ups, Research Firm Estimates," *Variety*. January 24, 2024.

[3] Butsch, Richard. "Forging a Citizen Audience," in *Convergence Media History* (New York, Routledge, 2009).

[4] Newcomb, Horace M. and Paul M. Hirsch. "Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research," *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, 8, no. 3 (1983): 45–55.

[5] Williams, Raymond. *Television* (New York, Routledge, 1974).

[6] Browne, Nick. "The Political Economy of the Television (super) text." *Quarterly Review of Film & Video* 9, no 3 (1984): 174–182.

[7] Meehan, Eileen. "Why We Don't Count: The Commodity Audience," *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).

[8] Smythe, Dallas W. "On the Audience Commodity and Its Work," in *Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, and Consciousness, and Canada* (Praeger, 1981).

[9] Jarrett, Kyle. *Feminism, Labour and Digital Media: The Digital Housewife* (Routledge, 2015).

[10] Hilmes, Michele. *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Cengage Learning, 2013).

[11] Kompare, Derek. *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (Routledge, 2006).