IN FOCUS: Media Industries Studies

Introduction

by PAUL McDONALD, editor

Media industries are studied across a broad range of subject areas, including economics, law, business and management, and geography. While ostensibly dealing with the same object, much of the work which could be regarded as studies of media industries has not been brought under the umbrella of what in very recent years has been called Media Industries Studies (hereafter MIS). With the label “studies” increasingly overused to describe ever-smaller micro-clusters of thought, caution should be taken before claiming any new field of study; MIS is not a distinct area but rather a subfield of research and pedagogy in Cultural, Film, and Media Studies, borrowing from and traversing those broader subject fields while also extending them in new directions of inquiry by taking an explicit focus on industrial structures, processes, and practices.

As Cultural, Film, and Media Studies are already inter- or multi-disciplinary fields of study, there is no admission of lack of rigor in declaring that MIS is not a “discipline”; rather, MIS revels in disciplinary heterogeneity. Despite this apparent openness, however, MIS is a subfield with definite limits. MIS operates in the “über-fields” of the humanities and social sciences and to date has found no benefit in taking from the “hard” sciences, for example. Even within the academic fields to which it belongs, MIS is limited in its disciplinary

borrowings: economics is clearly important to any study of media industries, but the impetus toward social and cultural criticism motivating much scholarship in MIS has seen the influence of political economy exerted, whereas neoclassical economics has been rejected. Consequently, proponents and practitioners of “media economics” and “cultural economics” operate outside MIS. Both outcomes of social research, political economy and what David Hesmondhalgh calls the “mainstream organizational sociology of culture,” have dealt with media industries, yet the latter focuses on organizational matters without the critical imperative that underpins a great deal of work in MIS. Therefore, MIS does not represent all studies of media industries but rather an intellectual subfield which has cherry-picked ideas, concepts, perspectives, and arguments from many—though highly circumscribed—directions.

Among signs of growth in this area of scholarship in recent years have been increases in the number of conference papers on industry topics presented at the annual Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) conference; the launch in 2011 of the SCMS Media Industries Scholarly Interest Group; and above all a boom in research publications on industry, many authored by members of the interest group. Whether all those speakers, members, or authors would choose to self-identify as working in MIS is highly unlikely. As this might suggest, “MIS” is a shorthand label of convenience applied retrospectively to categorize work on media industries emerging from Cultural, Film, and Media Studies.

Whether these developments can be described as an “industry turn” is debatable, for scholarship on the media industries has a history long preceding MIS, and many enclaves of Cultural, Film, and Media Studies retain widespread resistance to contemplating matters of industry. The latter point seems particularly important when writing in these very pages. As the journal of the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, Cinema Journal is sponsored by a professional association which grew out of the institutionalization of Film Studies. Despite the addition of “Media” to the society’s title in 2002, SCMS still demonstrates the founding legacy of Film Studies; after all, this journal still emphasizes Cinema in its title. Industry is fundamental to film, particularly the preferred object of most film studies: the narrative feature film. Yet paradoxically, a great deal of film scholarship has refused to acknowledge the industrial aspect of film. Commentators have charted the genealogy of MIS through the Frankfurt School and political economy (in its European, North American, and Global South incarnations). Yet it is debatable how foundational these influences were to the emergence of work on industry in Film Studies. From the 1950s onward, the political economy of communication directly addressed the industrial conditions of mass communication by developing a tradition of critique focused around the themes of ownership, concentration, media integration, and the international division of labor.

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sciences, however, this tradition had little or no impact on the development of Film Studies, in which an intellectual agenda derived from the humanities drew on literary theory, philosophy, history, and modern languages. As these fields did not encourage attention to industry, Film Studies arrived late to MIS. Tracing how Film Studies neglected and then “found” industry may therefore chart only one ancestral strand in the genealogy of MIS, but it is the one most appropriate for these pages and also aids understanding of the breadth of intellectual forces at work within the subfield.

Studies of film industries of course preceded the institutionalization of Film Studies. Although the authorship debate played a crucial role in legitimizing film scholarship, it placed a double obstacle in the way of attending to matters of industry: by situating the individual as the agent of production, authorship neglected attention to the broader industrial, institutional, and market contexts in which film exists; and subsequently, the critical dismissal of authorship in favor of attention to the meanings and politics of texts or discourses blocked attention to the circumstances in which those very texts or discourses were produced and circulated.

Text-centric criticism looked “inside” symbolic artifacts, most of which were industrially produced, to interrogate matters of meaning and representation, and it tied those concerns to questions of power through the operating concept of ideology. Here, Louis Althusser’s concept of relative autonomy was influential, as it promoted the idea that ideological production was not an epiphenomenal effect attributable to the economic base. However, in the mangled interpretation of Althusser adopted by poststructuralist film theory, relative autonomy became absolute autonomy and was read as giving apparent justification to the forgetting of economics by regarding ideology as a purely idealist effect created by the semiotic workings of the text floating independent of material ties. From such a perspective, all considerations of economic circumstances were immediately to be dismissed as “economism,” “determinist,” or “reductive” with any appeal to industry considered crude in comparison to the polysemic, contradictory complexities of textuality.

It was through the revisionist “historical turn” that Film Studies first began any concerted engagement with industry. While the new film history took many forms, broadly speaking, the workings, practices, and pleasures of film became situated within


wider contextual circumstances, including the industrial conditions of film’s very existence. As David Bordwell notes in his foreword to Douglas Gomery’s *Shared Pleasures* (a history of film exhibition in the United States which exemplifies these priorities), “‘revisionist’ historians . . . displace the question of what this or that film might mean . . . to ask instead how modes of film production and consumption [have] functioned.”7 Industry structure, the operations of studios or other kinds of firms, and the economics of technological change all featured in Gomery’s industrial historiography. In his chapter on economic film history written for *Film History: Theory and Practice*, the book Gomery coauthored with Robert C. Allen, he poses the question: “How, when, where, and why were motion pictures produced, distributed, and exhibited?”8 With a little adaptation, it is a question that could equally apply to all media industries in historical or contemporary contexts.

A secondary influence on the “industrialization” of Film Studies came through studies of television. Growing up in a period which saw the multiplication and integration of media forms, Film Studies always seemed a bit arcane, holding on to a sense of pure medium specificity which was at least diminishing and may never have existed in the first place. Since television achieved popularity in the immediate post–World War II decades, histories of film and the broadcast medium were closely intertwined.9 Intermedial connections therefore forced Film Studies to borrow insights from research into other popular entertainment, and in the 1990s many scholars were working across both film and television. Research on television (before any field or subfield was probably even recognized as Television Studies), particularly those strands influenced by mass communication theory and research, was already comfortable with studies of broadcast systems, communication policy, and media professions. Intellectual encounters with studies of television exposed Film Studies to the influence of Media Studies, and successive rounds of media conglomeration and the forces of convergence required Film Studies to face up to the unavoidable fact that film now exists as “content” in the convergent media environment, alongside—and integrated with—consumer video, games, music, and online media.

Documenting precisely this context, Janet Wasko’s *Hollywood in the Information Age* became a landmark text, for it situated film in a multiple-media marketplace where network television, cable, and the home entertainment business were equally as important as, if not more important than, theatrical exhibition.10 Wasko did not write a Film Studies book, but she did produce a study of film that became a crossover text that brought the lineage of political economy to the study of film and becoming a crucial

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9 As contributors to the collection *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), edited by Tino Balio, expertly demonstrate.

reference work for film researchers wanting to understand the particularities of the contemporary industriescape or, more generally, to situate film industrially.

Now that Media Industries Studies has “arrived,” what can it deliver? A rich panoply of questions are suggested by the subfield: How have media industries been organized and structured at different times? What are the functions and processes at work in making, selling, and circulating the outputs of the media industries? How does a company or the media industry at large respond to disruptive technological change? What struggles have confronted organized labor? How do patterns of ownership and control define economic or ideological power? What relationships exist between the media economy and the wider economy? How do media industries construct “audiences” and “consumers”? Why, how, and with what consequences do governments regulate the conduct of media industries? What impact do transnational firms, forms, and flows have on the operations of media industries? In what ways are digitization and convergence challenging traditional business models? How do spatial concentrations of media companies and institutions in clusters or cities shape geographies of media business? What systems of belief and value are produced and circulated among media practitioners? How can media industries support or impede democratic communication? What impact do technological obsolescence and the electronic waste produced by the disposal of media hardware have on the environment? Finally, there is the metacritical question: what frameworks can we construct for making sense of the preceding questions?

This In Focus brings together contributions from members of the Media Industries Studies Interest Group to reflect on the current and future state of MIS. While representing the most enduring tradition in the critical analysis of media industries, political economy has faced considerable criticism for what are seen as its conceptual limitations, and here Janet Wasko and Eileen Meehan answer those criticisms by demonstrating the diversity of political economy. Media Industries Studies may illuminate some of the blind spots of Cultural, Film, and Media Studies, but John T. Caldwell argues that the rush to embrace industry will lose out if this results in shunning elements of critical cultural theory that help address the “messy” complexities of media industries. Analyses of production commonly feature in MIS, most recently evidenced by the emergence of “production studies” as a subfield of MIS, but Alisa Perren proposes focusing equal attention on distribution. There may be divergences in the methods and perspectives employed in MIS, but research in this area has presumed a common object: the industrial aspects of media communications. Rather than accept industries as preexisting entities, Nitin Govil invites the conceptual challenge of contemplating the formal and informal structures, conditions, or practices that go toward “making up” an “industry.” Noting how MIS has inherited the prejudices of Film and Media Studies by largely focusing on the “vision industries,” Michele Hilmes not only argues that sound industries must find an equal place at the MIS table but also looks at how the new “soundwork” industry is innovatively working across media sectors. Finally, with a view toward the future vitality of MIS, Jennifer Holt concludes by addressing how this subfield may engage more actively with its analytic object while retaining its critical bite. Taken together, these contributions demonstrate the vibrancy of MIS and stake out proposals for enriching and transforming studies of media and culture.

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Critical Crossroads or Parallel Routes? Political Economy and New Approaches to Studying Media Industries and Cultural Products

by JANET WASKO and EILEEN R. MEEHAN

The study of media industries may be relatively new to the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS), but focus on this area has a long history and, in the United States, has included research on the interconnected industries of telephony, radio, film, journalism, and television. Much of this work can be divided into two perspectives: the first celebrates the individuals, working cohorts, companies, and markets constituting the entertainment-information sector of the US economy; the second contextualizes those individuals, working cohorts, companies, and markets within the ongoing development of capitalism. The celebratory approach has often been called media economics, whereas the contextual approach is generally called political economy of the media.

As supporters of the contextual approach, we are accustomed to being denounced, accused, and misrepresented: denounced as economic reductionists; accused of ignoring media workers, artifacts, and audiences; and misrepresented as latter-day members of the Frankfurt School who blame “evil capitalists” for the media’s content and operations. In this commentary, we respond to the recent round of misrepresentations of political economy with illustrations of research within a contextual tradition.

“New” Approaches to Studying Media Industries. During the 1990s, a number of approaches emerged in Media Studies building on the work of a few film scholars while asking questions similar to those explored by political economists. These “new” approaches have fallen under various rubrics, including creative industries, convergence

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2 Political economists focusing on the film industry in the past have included Thomas Guback, Manjunath Pendakur, Michael Nielsen, and a handful of others, and film scholars such as Thomas Schatz and Douglas Gomery (among a few others) have also examined issues relating to industrial structure and policies.
culture, production culture, production studies, cultural economy, and media industry studies. These developments are well represented by the growth of Media Industry Studies and the founding of the SCMS Media Industries Studies Scholarly Interest Group, which has continued to rapidly increase in popularity.

The explications of these “new” approaches have often included a rejection of political economy as a viable framework for studying the media. Certainly, the choice of a theoretical framework is up to the researcher. However, these discussions have also presented a number of misrepresentations of a political economic approach that we feel compelled to discuss. We note here that we do not necessarily speak for other researchers who may embrace a political economic perspective, sometimes as only one of the lenses they use to understand media.

We focus in the following pages on the discussions of a Media Industry Studies approach. For instance, in their edited collection devoted to Media Industry Studies, Holt and Perren state that they intend to provide a framework for the “new field”: “While the world does not necessarily need another field of study, one has indeed emerged.” Although that may have some validity in terms of SCMS, it ignores celebratory research on media industries published in journals such as those supported by the Broadcast Education Association, the International Communication Association, and the National Communication Association (previously the Speech Communication Association). Holt and Perren’s collection covers a range of perspectives, including calls for an integrative approach, as well as those who argue that the study of political economy—specifically, the North American version—is problematic.

In another example, Havens, Lotz, and Tinic have outlined an approach called Critical Media Industries Studies. They argue that this was part of Cultural Studies from its very beginning but was eclipsed by textual analysis and reception studies. Consequently, scholars have used various phrases to describe middle-range studies of the managerial and production employees working in media operations. They seek to unify these various scholars under the umbrella of Critical Media Industries.

We appreciate the increased attention to institutional and economic dimensions of the media. We also note that these “new” approaches claim to draw on existing theoretical frameworks, such as cultural studies and political economy. However, most often, the theories, methods, and findings of political economy are ultimately rejected. Some of the accusations have to do with the level of analysis and which media are


studied: “Critical political economy approaches, which predominantly and consistently focus on the larger level operations of media institutions—and, with few exceptions, emphasize news production—have been a favored paradigm among many media scholars looking to add an industrial dimension to their research.” A neglect of entertainment and/or cultural media is thus claimed to limit “the usefulness of many political-economic theories and perspectives, which are based on the industrial analysis of news.”

The analysis of political economy of the media, according to Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, represents a consistent “focus on the larger level operations of media institutions, general inattention to entertainment programming, and incomplete explanation of the role of human agents (other than those at the pinnacle of conglomerate hierarchies) in interpreting, focusing, and redirecting economic forces that provide for complexity and contradiction within media industries.” Thus, the new critiques have joined the old ones. Although some political economists (including the authors of this essay) seem to be exempt from some of this criticism, the new critiques typically condemn the tradition of political economy exemplified by Herbert Schiller and Robert McChesney, assuming this to be reductionist and too economistic. Overall, the claim is that political economy is simplistic and inadequate.

The Political Economy of Media as a Contextual Approach. What can we say? Even a cursory review of the literature on political economy of media reveals that most of these claims can be easily dismissed. Political economic research of media in North America involves analysis of a wide range of media industries and different levels of analysis. It is not predominantly focused on news, and there are numerous examples of studies of television, advertising, film, video, video games, recorded music, telecommunications, the Internet, and digital media, as well as studies of issues pertaining (but not limited) to intellectual property, ratings and audience measurement, consumer culture, and privacy and surveillance, to name just a few. Clearly, the claim that political economic research has remained at the “meta” level cannot be based on a thorough literature search, which would reveal in-depth

7 Ibid., 236 (our emphasis).
8 Ibid. (our emphasis).
10 For instance, Thomas H. Guback, The International Film Industry, Western Europe and America since 1945 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969); Janet Wasko, How Hollywood Works (London: Sage Publications, 2003); Eileen R. Meehan, Why TV Is Not Our Fault: Television Programming, Viewers, and Who’s Really in Control (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005); Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); William Kunz, Culture Conglomerates: Consolidation in the Motion Picture and Television Industries (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006). We also want to strongly defend the attention that has been paid to news and public affairs by past and present critical researchers and political economists as relevant and vital to analyzing the role of media in public life and in building open and democratic societies.
analysis of industries such as those named above, in addition to studies of dominant corporations such as Disney, News Corp., Bertelsmann, Time Warner, Telefónica, and Google (among others), as well as smaller, independent, alternative, or regional media companies.\(^\text{11}\)

Accusations of economic determinism and reductionism deserve more attention and bring us back to the differentiation between contextual and celebratory traditions. The notion that everything can be reduced to economic relationships is generally called vulgar Marxism. That position is philosophically and empirically untenable. Thus, researchers in the contextual tradition reject such reductionism.\(^\text{12}\) However, the fact that reductionism is untenable does not mean that media scholars can ignore economics. In most countries, the industries constituting the entertainment-information sector are dominated by private corporations seeking to earn profits from advertisers and from buyers of tickets, electronic access, or physical copies. Within those corporations, managerial, creative, technical, and crafts workers are employed as salaried, hourly, or contract workers—just like in any other industry.

But unlike the banking, shoe manufacturing, or fast-food industries, media industries produce commodities that convey narratives, arguments, visions, symbolic worlds, and imagined possibilities. Regardless of the particular technologies for distribution and access, media products are simultaneously artifacts and commodities that are both created by artists and manufactured by workers, and present a vision for interpretation and an ideology for consumption to an active public of interpreters who may also be consumers targeted by advertisers or product placements and a commodity audience that can be measured and sold to advertisers. These complexities of the phenomena under study ensure that economic reductionism has no explanatory power for contextual researchers. Rather, they suggest lines for interdisciplinary thinking and collaborative research. Thus, scholars working in the contextual tradition are keenly aware that research must address not only media corporations and markets but also the people whose collective labor creates media artifacts, the artifacts themselves, and the people who engage with or are exposed to those artifacts.

It is often claimed that political economists who study the media ignore workers and labor. For instance, “How workers function . . . is not illuminated by conventional critical political economy research.”\(^\text{13}\) Since political economy and critical cultural studies emerged together as contextual approaches in the 1970s and 1980s, there has been a steadily growing amount of work aimed at understanding the role of labor in the media, from the first *Critical Communications Review* in 1983 (which considered a range


\(^{13}\) Havens, Lotz, and Tinic, “Critical Media Industry Studies,” 236.

Although the tendency has been to focus on workers’ struggles, a wide range of studies have addressed media work and labor organizations in the media business. For instance, Hartsough examined relations between the Hollywood studios and unionized workers in the 1930s, as well as efforts by film unions to organize television workers between 1947 and 1952.\footnote{Denise Hartsough, “Crime Pays: The Studios’ Labor Deals in the 1930s,” in \textit{The Studio System}, ed. Janet Staiger (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989): 230–245; “Film Union Meets Television: IA Organizing Efforts, 1947–1952,” \textit{Labor History} 33, no. 3 (1992): 357–371.} Another example has been Nielsen’s work with film worker and union organizer Gene Mailes to present a personal account of the struggle to secure democratic and independent unions within the larger industrial and political contexts in which film workers, the Mafia, studio moguls, and politicians operated.\footnote{Michael Nielsen and Gene Mailes, \textit{Hollywood’s Other Blacklist: Union Struggles in the Studio System} (London: British Film Institute, 1995).}

More recently, Deepa Kumar examined the Teamster’s successful use of corporate media in its strike against UPS, illuminating not only strategies for influencing commercial media texts to get labor’s views into the media system but also how workers can organize to resist globalization.\footnote{Deepa Kumar, \textit{Outside the Box: Corporate Media, Globalization, and the UPS Strike} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).}


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21 Eileen R. Meehan and Ellen Riordan, eds., \textit{Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
which contributors to *Women and Media: International Perspectives* examined portrayals of women in the media, women’s interventions to change traditional media, and women’s use of alternative and emerging media as a means for expression.22

Edited collections have been a regular outcome of dialogue and collaboration among political economists, cultural scholars, and social researchers. For instance, Hagen and Wasko gathered media ethnographers and political economists to explore interactions between audience engagement, generic forms of programming, commercial measurement, and human agency.23 Collaborative research projects have also brought together researchers from different critical perspectives and often from different national settings. Examples range from the US-based Lifetime cable project, in which a textual analyst and political economist worked together at every level of the project, to the Global Disney Audiences Project, which involved numerous researchers and multiple methodologies to document people’s experiences of Disney’s products and penetration into local economies.24

Integrations of political economy and cultural studies are also achieved in single-author books. Here we cite only two examples: Jyotsna Kapur’s examination of the relationships among children’s play, corporate media, neoliberalism, and the consumerization and corporatization of childhood, and Stabile’s study of crime news, which combines historiography with textual, class-based, and industrial analysis.25 Both books show the intertwining of sociality, culture, lived experience, economics, and politics that provides the context for the media.

Many other contextual scholars working in political economy, cultural studies, social research, or some combination thereof have produced a prodigious amount of research that is worthy of inclusion here. This outpouring of research and its recognition of agency—whether individual, collective, corporate, or institutional—as well as structuration, has been ongoing for decades. For many contextual scholars, the conceptual or methodological divisions between or among political economy, cultural studies, and social research have essentially collapsed, yielding scholarship that synthesizes these areas with grace and delicacy. One example is Anderson’s analysis of the music industry, although many others might be cited.26 Even this very short overview of relevant research, which focuses primarily on North American research,

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26 Tim J. Anderson, *Making Easy Listening: Material Culture and Postwar American Recording* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006) examines the music industry’s political economy, the aesthetics enabled by technologies of recording, labor union reactions to technological threats to people’s livelihoods, and popular reaction to Warner Bros.’ use of dubbing and rerecording in *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, 1964).
should demonstrate that contextual approaches do not ignore media makers, artifacts, or audiences.

**Concluding Thoughts.** It may be possible to argue that this current wave of media industry approaches represents an effort to claim the study of media production in a more palatable form for cultural analysts, policy wonks, and the media industry itself. In other words, the aim might be viewed as an approach that neither is heavily invested in (overtly) neoliberal economics (represented by media economics) nor has the taint of Marxism (represented by political economy).

This strategy would seem to be working, as some of the researchers associated with these approaches have developed working relationships with selected media industries. We are left wondering, is the creation of such a new approach actually necessary when the contextualized approaches of political economy and cultural studies provide ample and strong tools—both theoretical and methodological—for analysis of the media? Furthermore, are these recent proposals mostly attempts to create a stripped-down, more acceptable, apolitical political economy or a meaner, broader, more relevant cultural studies? Since political economy is so often demonized in these discussions, we would guess that it is probably the latter. We also wonder, is the call for middle-range studies focused on white-collar workers another way to paper over class structure and to erase the ultimate context in which we all work, that is, capitalism? Indeed, the critique of capitalism and capitalist media is often missing from these industry discussions, a distinction that may indeed separate celebratory and contextual approaches. Again, it is important that more scholars are paying attention to the study of media as industry and commodity. But it would be helpful if “new” approaches would present a more accurate and careful representation of previous traditions, or would at least admit that they are rejecting a political economic approach on ideological grounds.

Of course, this is not the first time—nor are these the only examples of—misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and rejection of Marxism, political economy, and/or the political economy of the media. Nevertheless, careful analysis of capitalism, its structures, the consequences of those structures, and the contradictions that abound, is more than ever relevant and needed, as represented by recent calls for a reinvigoration of Marxist analysis. Indeed, the study of political economy is definitely growing in North America and internationally.

27 A recent example is the Media Industries Project, housed at the Carsey-Wolf Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara: “The Media Industries Project brings industry practitioners, policy experts, and leading scholars into lively dialogue on the future prospects of modern media. Focusing especially on digital media, globalization, and creative labor, the Project provides independent analysis of key trends and developments in media culture” (http://www.carseywolf.ucsb.edu/mip/about). Meanwhile, Henry Jenkins heads the Convergence Culture Consortium, an academic and business network which seeks to rethink consumer relations in an age of “participatory culture” (http://www.convergenceculture.org/aboutc3/).


our work with other contextual approaches that appreciate the significance of a critical political economic perspective while also aiming to critically interrogate and challenge the media industries.

Para-Industry: Researching Hollywood’s Blackwaters

by JOHN T. CALDWE..
analysis are not mutually exclusive but rather are inseparable from each other. Creating a hierarchy of these approaches is an empty, myopic exercise. Second, the complex systems defining contemporary industries demand more holistic, flexible, and aggregate methodologies on the part of Cinema and Media Studies scholars. There are certain things that social science does not do well (i.e., it misses the centrality of industrial textual practice), and there are certain things that CMS does not do well (i.e., it glosses over the economic regimes in which texts are always embedded). Not every scholar needs to include ethnography, economic analysis, institutional research, fieldwork, and textual analysis in all research projects. But at least acknowledging the necessary connections between each of these registers is crucial, because it allows focused (deep-and-narrow) studies to fill in the missing pieces of a much larger picture. This, in turn, allows scholars to participate in an integrated, aggregating dialogue about industries that cuts across humanities and social sciences border policing. What follows sketches the disciplinary outlines of a bigger tent in CMS, and the need for a bigger methodological toolbox as well, which underscores why industry research is too important to leave solely to economists, political economists, and media social scientists.

1. Industry Is Cultural. Each socio-professional community in film and television surrounds itself with marks of cultural capital. This broad-based, workaday cultural staging does not just help lubricate the many bureaucratic frictions of production or intensify the value of on-screen programming and niche marketing. Cultural staging is also used habitually to value below-the-line crafts workers and to leverage professional identities for organizational advantage in the above-the-line sectors. Above this micro-level, management professors require their media industry–bound MBA students to master the flexible managerial environments that fuel creativity, innovation, and profitable organizational cultures. This exposes the specter of competing disciplinary ships moving in opposite directions. That is, the “cultural turn” in economics and management theory has been under way for more than a decade (leading to the hybrid field of cultural economy), even as CMS has witnessed a general move in the other direction, away from culture as a master framework in its “industrial turn.” Jettisoning textual analysis as we move to industry research only means that we will miss much of what industry itself obsesses about. How do film and television firms institutionalize critical and cultural studies frameworks as they organize and incentivize their workforces? Or as they brand themselves by adopting the practices of cultural vanguards or identity politics?

2. Industry Is Hermeneutical. Industry functions not solely as a corporate or market arrangement but also as a profit-driven hermeneutical enterprise. We seldom fully consider the fallout when our “object” of research is a corporate “subject” that already functions as a self-conscious critical or interpretive agent. I adapt “para-industry”

here less from Genette’s view of para-texts (as material “surrounding” the primary text) than from “paramilitary” (since Hollywood closely mirrors the production “outsourcing” and critical analysis of the Iraq invasion to Blackwater-type subcontractors). Hollywood’s Blackwaters don’t just produce “content.” They also traffic in the theories, oppositional postures, and analytical justifications that scholars have developed to maintain objectivity and distance. Para-industry’s marketing of cultural and intellectual capital—both on-screen and off—challenges us. How can we intellectually navigate this buffering commercial shadow, and thereby productively engage industry’s new critical and theorizing “handlers”? In 1989, David Bordwell criticized “apparatus” and “high theorists” for hijacking and derailing Film Studies from its full potential, for having collapsed the whole field into reductive hermeneutics, to mere matters of interpretation. Yet how might we employ the kind of modest, inductive, mid-level theorizing that Bordwell proposed when trying to explain the highly immodest, interpretive theorizing that transmedia’s 360-degree marketing now churns out? Practically, how can we do effective textual analysis of this corporate interpretive theorizing, or even wade through it to get to our primary target, which industrial hermeneutics constantly moves through reiteration?

3. Industry Is Racialized. Visit almost any film or television production company and look at the racial demographics of the firm’s workforce. Even firms that celebrate progressive multiculturalism on-screen, or that actually hire racial minorities, tend to herd and categorize those diversity hires into de facto departmental “ghettos.” Firms happy to showcase that they’ve upped their employment of racial minorities by X percent are typically loath to admit that all or most of these hires serve as greeters, receptionists, assistants, and those who get the coffee for guests. By the time these guests have been handed off to the higher-ups by their diversity staffer for scheduled meetings, they have usually entered a sanctum defined by white privilege. Beretta Smith-Shomade and Vincent Brook both provide good precedents for how these sorts of industrial racial and ethnic practices can be researched and effectively theorized. How do the off-screen racial politics of media firms, and the architectural management of minority assistants, affect the firm’s conceptualization of its target audiences and its development of content or narratives for the screen?

3 In the same way that contractors dwarfed official military personnel in the Iraq invasion, contractors dwarf official industry firms in Hollywood. Thus, scholars necessarily confront para-industry when trying to study industry. The para-industry, furthermore, is itself a primary cultural expression of industry. This means that my propositional categories here (“sexual,” “gendered,” “racial,” “classed,” “surveilled”) function “hermeneutically” as de facto critical articulations by industry about itself. In my formulation, the aggregate cultural dimensions of industry comprise the para-industry.


5 Executive producers like Shonda Rhimes and Felicia D. Henderson are rare exceptions that prove this rule.

4. **Industry Is Sexualized and Gendered.** Problematic sexual and gender politics pervade many production firms. Feature and prime-time camera crews provide dramatic examples of how the gendered segregation of specific roles is justified on the basis of suspect notions of “natural” abilities. Women have to overmasculinize to prove themselves as operators or assistant camera operators. Many women crew members are implicitly expected to bring their natural abilities at “mothering” from the domestic “second shift” to manage the workplace. Subtle expectations abound that women are better at “detail work,” “keeping records,” or handling interdepartmental communications. Although the below-the-line crafts are highly gendered in this way, postfeminism cuts against this grain in public discourses because few professionals who have made it will want to admit that their success resulted from anything beyond abilities and performance. Judith Butler’s notion of performativity is particularly useful in understanding these practices. How are both men and women placed and segregated in the workspace? What cultural traditions inform this gender management? How are perceptions of natural skill sets cultural constructions?

5. **Industry Is Affective and Embodied.** The Motion Pictures Editors Guild recently invited “non-union” editors from the burgeoning reality TV industry to an organizing meeting aimed at encouraging non-union editing firms to unionize. Into the meeting I witnessed limped scores of mostly young to middle-age editors, all anxious to calculate the benefits, costs, and dangers of unionizing. Editors complained about the high incidence of repetitive stress syndrome, early-onset arthritis, and wives in their thirties who wanted (finally) to bear children but could not do so because reality TV production denies workers medical insurance. This gathering blamed the twelve-to sixteen-hour workdays, six-day workweeks, and round-the-clock pressures of their workplaces as the culprits. Yet the editors also provided clear-eyed, prescient analyses of how the UK, Dutch, and US multimedia conglomerates get away with monetizing and debilitating their “professional” bodies for profit. They dramatized the human impact of production at the local level, vividly underscoring macro-level political-economic critiques. What happens if we turn CMS’s recent interest in embodiment, affect, and phenomenology away from its normal screen-viewer dyad and direct it toward better understanding how media is made?

6. **Industry Is Disciplined through Self-Surveillance.** Continental theory doesn’t always “fit” industry, yet Foucault provides a veritable organizational bible for how media management and production works. His frameworks convincingly explain how institutions engineer the small-scale psychic conditions through which vast pools of freelance production professionals self-manage in order to serve corporations. Hollywood also reincarnates Bentham’s “panopticon” for the twenty-first century, the

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current “precariat” workforce replacing the original convicts. Industry surveillance systematically disciplines workers through a series of long-sanctioned rituals—giving notes, on-set rewrites, entry-level self-sacrificing, worker retreats, and so on. But self-disciplining, based on the perception of surveillance, is much more ubiquitous. Whether or not Creative Artists Agency, William Morris, Warner Bros., NBC, Variety, Sundance, or the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees are actually monitoring your every move, everyone learns quickly to act like they are. This spurs the internalized imperative that everyone—from the most precarious outsider to the most self-aggrandizing insider—must constantly market his or her “brand,” through a combination of calculated workplace behavior and effective online networking and “reputation management.”

How does reputation management function in your research sector? What are the cultural or economic conditions that make a worker’s self-management and effectiveness at being watched monetizable to corporations?

7. **Industry Is Rhizomatic.** “The industry” is not a monolith controlled by five or six giant conglomerates but rather a series of dense rhizomatic networks of subcompanies held at a safe distance, loosely structured to flexibly adapt to new labor markets, new digital technologies, and consumer unruliness. Deleuze’s paradigm resonates with professional as well as consumer cultures, since film and television comprise constantly reaffiliating entities, briefly aligned by contract in fleeting, opportunistic postures of willed affinity, postures that quickly evaporate when revenues do. This rhizomatic structure creates as many challenges for industry researchers as it does for audience or cultural studies researchers. Celebrants of crowdsourcing in the rhizome forget that media production has deployed and monetized crowdsourcing as an internal labor strategy for decades. Several key pillars of new media theorizing—the wisdom, intelligence, and wealth of networks—need to be rethought when applied to research on industrial rhizomes. Bambi Haggins provides a “transmedia” model that is radically different from Jenkins’s model precisely by following the racial logic of the rhizome.

How do we more tightly frame or even define our data sets or samples within these networks? How do we research production communities that function as crowds or mobs? If one’s objects of research (a film, director, cinephilia, queer cinema) are only nodes that make sense as part of larger multidimensional networks, how can we rethink research design to follow this logic to adjacent nodes and secondary links? This

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8 John Caldwell, “Industrial Geography Lessons: Socio-Professional Rituals and the Borderlands of Production Culture,” in Media/Space: Place, Scale and Culture in a Media Age, ed. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy (London: Routledge, 2004), 163–189; Caldwell, Production Culture, chap. 5.


is especially challenging since the industrial rhizome inevitably takes us away from our given starting point (e.g., film, director, cinephilia, or queer cinema).

8. Industry Is Aesthetically Salaried. I’ve continued to puzzle over this question: if media industries are as alienating, stressful, and exploitative as my fieldwork informants have claimed, then why do vast numbers of the stressed still flock to their gates? My response to this irony has been to map systematically the symbolic payroll systems through which underemployed and/or underpaid workers are actually “paid.” This means considering the complicated forms of nonfinancial artistic, social, and cultural capital that are exchanged daily to get production work, hire top professionals, close deals, justify overtime, demand “extras” from a technician’s skill set (if he or she wants to stay employed), persuade younger “workers” to work for free as interns or assistants, and persuade outsiders to provide on-screen content for “free.” Getting underpaid, outsourced visual effects workers in Mumbai to work without on-screen credits means “paying” them in some substitute form of artistic capital that doesn’t cost the firm any real money. Studios never acknowledge or calculate these symbolic forms of payment and cultural capital in official production budgets. Yet all high-quality content that studios produce is—by definition—built on the foundation provided by the unacknowledged artistic capital that workers themselves “pay” and laterally “exchange” to survive. An industry defined by aspiration (rather than by stable employment) creates a cultural economy in which everyone constantly stylizes his or her public persona with the trappings of artistry or “legitimacy.”

9. Industry Is Textualized. Ethnographic fieldwork can provide rich insights that speculative theorizing misses. Yet going into the field or workplace, or serving as an “embedded researcher,” will not necessarily provide the kind of direct, observable phenomena or commonsense correctives that someone trained in text-based, theory-driven humanities or media theory may expect. In fact, I myself find fieldwork far more slippery and less reductive than traditional textual analysis. Inevitably, what I saw or heard informants say was really only what I thought I saw, or what I thought I heard informants say—or what I hoped I’d see and hear in order to prove some point I had carried with me into the field. Industry is not transparent. Industry is not easily accessible. Even if one is fortunate enough to be embedded in a media company, deciphering it is formidable. What one sees in a corporate environment has almost always been strategically designed into it. What high-level professionals say has almost always been scripted and rehearsed. In this sense, therefore, industrial disclosures to


14 Alexandra Edmonds David’s ethnographic work on “aspirational” cultures in Hollywood suggests one key to the success of this symbolic payroll system. See David, “Risky Business: Aspiring Actors and the Selling of the Self” (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2010).
scholars should first be approached as performance, as trade “ stagings.” This actually opens opportunities for CMS scholars, given their competencies in close cultural analysis compared to economists and quantitative communication scientists. The latter group is relatively blind to the range of textualized “realities” that industry stages. This textual blindness is willing, voluntary, and validated by those disciplines, through the research methods they police. How have the disclosures in your research sector been scripted? What conventions or trade genres inflect the information you find? Who gives it to you, and why?

10. Industry Is a Mess. Significant research on complex systems has developed outside of CMS. Yet media and film historians have not meaningfully engaged this scholarship to better understand film and television. I argued in *Screen* that the dense interaction of film, television, and marketing today makes the aggregate industry “a mess” for scholars to research. This was not a denigration or critical dismissal. Rather, I was affirming the elegance and institutional importance of the new textual complexity. We need to augment the traditional tools used in textual analysis and archival research with ethnographic and cultural-economic frameworks that allow us to see and account for the institutional logic of multiplatform texts and the cultural logic of the complex labor arrangements that produce them. Far from being a zero-sum game displacing other research orthodoxies, my call for “integrated cultural-industrial analyses” presupposes that CMS must develop more holistic systems approaches if we are to fully understand today’s complex systems of film and television. The flexible, integrated research model I seek necessarily requires a bigger disciplinary tent.

Two theorists—strange bedfellows—have guided my search for a bigger tool kit: Bruno Latour and Clifford Geertz. Latour’s actor-network theory provides an apt account of my experience with camera crews. Subsequently, it has helped me to map the ways that agency is distributed and enrolled across human and nonhuman parts of other production networks (which comprise tools, spaces, workers, and firms). If Latour shatters sociology’s once-clear structure-versus-agency binary, Geertz brings fundamental insights that enable CMS scholars to grapple with the industrial hermeneutic described above. Geertz rejects the idea that any field setting can provide evidence of direct social function or meaning. Rather, the field worker can confront culture only as a series of texts about other texts, a process best understood as the way a culture represents itself to itself. Geertz’s model of the researcher “struggling to look over the shoulder of his subject who struggles to make sense of himself to himself” describes perfectly my own experience studying media industries. Social groups, professional communities, and individuals constitute the industrial rhizome and include

15 A good introduction to this research is John Law and Annemarie Mol, *Complexities: Social Studies of Knowledge Practices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), as well as the field of science, technology, and society in general.
professionalizing groups, trade associations, representatives, group-forming groups, underemployed professionals, unpaid workers, the fully unemployed and inactive, aspirants, idle victims of ageism, low-end awards and cultural competitions among marginalized para-industrial communities, bottom-feeders that opportunistically sell access and insights to desperate aspirants, marginal networks within ancillary media support industries, unaccredited film school and student loan and degree mills, and even “legitimate” universities and film schools. Geertz and Latour provide basic frameworks that allow us to begin describing these connections in more systematic ways.

Para-Industry Complications. Researchers usually get only managed top-down explanations about production. This makes research from the ground up challenging in commercial media’s proprietary worlds. Para-industry’s buffer management means that production research must self-reflexively acknowledge how industry selectively parses out research data to us in the first place. This is not simply because poststructuralist anthropology now requires full disclosure and self-reflexivity from ethnographers.18 The real reason is that scholars who research industries are themselves extensions of industry as well.

My habitual response to this complex state of affairs is generally to “beware of strangers bearing [behind-the-scenes] gifts.” In other words, we must be wary of what industry gives us. Yet while we must work with what we’ve been given, we also need to pin down those gatekeeping disclosures more rigorously within the actual institutional spaces where industry and academia intersect.19 Industry ethnographies can seldom be about a cleanly bounded “production culture”; they must necessarily be cross-cultural studies in which the scholar accounts for how industry is institutionally using the academy or researcher rather than merely being scholarly accounts of what is going on “over the fence” in some supposed inner sanctum that we pretend to glimpse into.20

Eager doctoral students at the University of California, Los Angeles, intent on emulating the classic Malinowski-style participant observation of Rosten’s and Powdermaker’s 1940s industry research sometimes get depressed when I suggest an alternative: shifting to ethnographies of Hollywood’s cross-cultural interfaces with “us.”21 This seems somehow a less significant media or cultural phenomenon than being on a real inside. I argue that these contact zones and subcompanies are actually more real than industry’s mythological centers and that they are as important to those industries

20 This reflexive scrutiny can be particularly tricky once Critical Media Studies departments like my own move into corporate-funded research “partnerships.”
as their centers. Media industries want us obsessing about their idealized centers. Yet they do not want us to think critically about their ubiquitous cultural interfaces. And universities are now extensions of the creative industries, further clouding industries as clean targets for our research. Industrial research therefore requires examination of the complex 360-degree cultural interfaces and viral contact zones that media industries now carefully stage around us as we study them.

23 Caldwell, Production Culture, 274–315.

Rethinking Distribution for the Future of Media Industry Studies

by Alisa Perren

A cursory survey of the recent academic literature on media distribution might lead one to see little thematic consistency. Nonetheless, there are two points about which those writing on distribution seem to agree: first, scholars have examined distribution far less frequently than either production or consumption; and second, the digital age has fueled dramatic changes in distribution processes and practices that necessitate greater interrogation. In this essay, I argue that although it is true that distribution has been less extensively examined than many other aspects of the media industries, there is more work being undertaken than one might suspect. In fact, the sense that there is a paucity of literature on distribution is primarily the result of definitional inconsistencies and the absence of a conversation across various areas of Media Studies. By arguing for a reconceptualization of distribution that integrates existing work from such areas as television studies, film history, political economy of communication, moving-image archiving, and global media studies,

we can expand how we think about this subject. In placing discussions about distribution in dialogue, and by pointing to some emergent themes in the scholarship on the topic, it is possible to enable Media Industry Studies to imagine new ways of researching, teaching, and writing about the crucial “space in between” production and consumption.

What Do We Mean by “Distribution”? And How Has It Been Studied? Distribution companies have been labeled as “middlemen” and their employees as “intermediaries” responsible for ensuring that media find an audience. Yet distributors handle a large variety of different tasks. Overviews of the media industries typically identify the following as the primary emphases of distributors: assembling financing, procuring and/or licensing rights for projects for various platforms (e.g., iTunes, Netflix) or markets (e.g., Japanese theatrical, Latin American satellite television), managing the inflow and outflow of income from various corporate partners, designing release schedules and marketing strategies to establish and sustain audience awareness, and building and managing libraries.

A wide range of theoretical and methodological frameworks have been used to explore these types of distribution activities. Film scholars employing a political-economic approach, such as Philip Drake and Thomas Schatz, have examined how a handful of major conglomerates have dominated the global media business through rights management and exploitation. Their top-down examinations of corporate power and control employ trade and journalistic publications, along with corporate reports, as primary sources for research. Television Studies scholars coming from a cultural studies perspective, such as Timothy Havens and Derek Kompare, have taken more of a bottom-up approach, considering the cultural dimensions of distribution decisions. Havens attended trade shows and interviewed those involved in making acquisitions decisions; Kompare dug into archival sources and scoured research databases to learn how companies’ distribution decisions shape our understanding of television history. Global media studies scholars such as Michael Curtin, Jade Miller, and Juan Piñon have blended interviews, on-site visits, and analysis of selected media texts to explore how local, regional, and global distribution networks are structured and how content flows through various regions.


4 Timothy Havens, Global Television Marketplace (London: British Film Institute, 2006); Derek Kompare, Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television (New York: Routledge, 2005).

Meanwhile, media historians such as Caroline Frick, Jennifer Horne, and Haidee Wasson have shown how archives, libraries, and museums have long cultivated alternative distribution networks and functioned as redistributors.6 These scholars depict the ongoing tensions that exist between professionals and practitioners who seek to preserve moving-image artifacts and those who wish to provide widespread access to those images to the public. Such studies are potent interventions in the era of convergence, effectively reinforcing that distribution can be conceived of as an activity taken on by those outside of major for-profit corporations. As one example, Frick’s book Saving Cinema highlights how institutions (e.g., the Museum of Modern Art), government agencies (e.g., the Library of Congress), and international associations (e.g., the International Federation of Film Archives, UNESCO) have engaged with and participated in the business practices of corporations while also modeling alternative modes of distribution.

Across these areas, much of the recent discussion has been on the likely impact of new technologies on the circulation of content. Members of the industry and press have also chimed in regularly on this topic. For example, journalist Scott Kirsner and media executive Jordan Levin have spoken with optimism about the potential opportunities for outsiders to gain audiences and income as they bypass traditional distribution channels through disintermediation.7 Much has also been said about how the major corporate players are adjusting their business models and rethinking the ways that content moves through space (flows) and time (windowing).8 Certainly, this topic has been central to my own work; elsewhere I have considered the distinctive strategies employed by the film and television divisions of the major Hollywood conglomerates as they have struggled to navigate the contemporary media landscape and to “monetize” their content.9 This approach is compelling not only because it is topical—it offers researchers the ability to see struggles and strategies “in progress”—but also because it is methodologically manageable.

As John Caldwell has noted in his exploration of production cultures, it is much easier to study labor and to gain access to media production (e.g., writers’ rooms, sets) than it is to study management and gain entrée into corporate suites.10 Without

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9 For example, see Alisa Perren, “Business as Unusual: Conglomerate-Sized Challenges for Film and Television in the Digital Arena,” Journal of Popular Film and Television 38, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 72–78.

doubt, issues of access have contributed to the directions taken in work on distribution. Researchers often have had to rely primarily on public sources, such as newspapers, magazines, and trade publications; in so doing, they are forced to structure their work to account for industry discourse and spin. Many of these sources, unsurprisingly, have focused on the new and the now, namely the challenges new technologies pose to major companies’ bottom lines. Even those who find creative ways to obtain access (see Jennifer Holt’s contribution in this “In Focus”) still struggle to get past the public relations arms of major companies and to secure detailed, accurate data. The research process does not get any easier for those studying non-Western distributors or smaller-scale operations; for example, those releasing Nollywood films often maintain records only informally. Similarly, when smaller companies go out of business—a frequent occurrence in the independent realm—their records often go with them.

The numerous constraints placed on those interested in researching distribution should not prevent scholars from proceeding. Rather than seeing these methodological hurdles as deterrents, we might think about how they challenge us to rethink the very meaning of the term distribution and thus potentially open up new avenues of inquiry. This is the perspective taken by Ramon Lobato in his recently published book, Shadow Economies of Cinema. Lobato argues for moving beyond “formal,” top-down approaches to distribution that look mainly at large-scale motion-picture distribution operations. Approaches like these, he maintains, must be supplemented by an examination of the contributions of “informal operators,” including the “individuals, organizations, and virtual publics operating at the edges of—or entirely outside—the legal movie industry.” Lobato provides case studies of alternative distribution networks—including the US straight-to-video market and pirate vendors in Mexico City—as a means of demonstrating the value of taking industry studies beyond “debates over representation and interpretation” and toward issues of access and agency.

Echoing the call issued by Lobato, the remainder of this essay proposes three ways that we might draw from and build on existing discourses of distribution. Offered here are particular approaches that, though present in some recent scholarship, might be expanded on further. By no means should what follows be considered all-inclusive. Rather, the frameworks on offer should be viewed as evidence of the richness of the scholarship already in progress, thereby reinforcing the value of integrating conversations currently occurring in several separate areas of Media Industry Studies.

**Toward a Comparative Approach.** There is an interesting tension between the particular and the universal that is evident in much of the scholarship on distribution. In terms of “the particular,” many scholars focus on issues pertaining to a specific medium and disciplinary formation. So, for example, in a recent collection, Digital Disruption:

11 Miller, “Global Nollywood.”
14 Ibid., 2.
Cinema Moves On-Line, several Film Studies scholars consider how Internet distribution is affecting the kinds of motion pictures that are produced and consumed. Similarly, in The Television Will Be Revolutionized, Television Studies scholar Amanda Lotz considers how the meaning of “televison” changes as distribution methods shift with the arrival of new technologies. In terms of “the universal,” a handful of studies roam “across media,” exploring the general impact of the digital on how, when, and where consumers access content, regardless of the medium in question.

Although the former approach often provides greater nuance, it risks suggesting that the issues facing the particular medium (and being raised by that subdiscipline) are completely unique. The latter approach, meanwhile, illustrates larger patterns more effectively but is in danger of implying greater homogeneity and uniformity than actually exist across the media industries. What could be useful are more studies that provide comparative approaches across media. Detailed case studies that compare the logics governing the business strategies of particular corporate divisions (e.g., the music and publishing divisions of a corporation), that look at the discourses circulated by or about specific institutional agents (e.g., the “digital distribution executive” in comic books versus gaming), or that examine how power is enacted in individual physical spaces (e.g., film versus television markets and trade shows) can help scholars to move beyond an attachment to media specificity in order to assess more clearly where differences and similarities exist. The often parallel-but-separate conversations taking place in different areas of research might diminish if more comparative approaches are initiated under the broader heading of “Distribution Studies.”

Attending to the Cultural. Contributions by scholars such as Lobato and Havens show that a distribution-from-below approach has already gained traction in Media Industry Studies. Such work is valuable for taking us beyond examinations of the largest Western corporate players and biggest government funding bodies, calling attention to the contributions made by smaller-scale entities and less well-funded operations. These types of studies have explored how “commonsense” ideas about distribution have developed and been disseminated. To build on this type of scholarship further, Caldwell’s work in production studies might be translated more directly.

16 This approach tends to be favored by textbooks that provide broad overviews of the media industries. For example, see Havens and Lotz, Understanding Media Industries; David Croteau and William Hoynes, The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2006). In Cultural Industries (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 24, David Hesmondhalgh strikes an impressive balance between the universal and the particular. However, his book does not focus at length specifically on the subject of distribution. He opts to use the term circulation instead of distribution, with reproduction, distribution, and marketing all falling under this broader term.
18 Also see Todd Gitlin, Inside Prime Time (New York: Pantheon, 1983); Richard Ohmann, Gage Averill, Michael Curtin, David Shumway, and Elizabeth Traube, eds., Making and Selling Culture (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996).
to the distribution sector of the media business. For example, Caldwell’s taxonomy of industry texts and rituals—in which he charts the types of information that production workers disclose via intragroup, intergroup, and extragroup exchanges—could be reformulated.\(^{19}\) For the purposes of studying distribution, it might instead be used to explore how those working in different sectors of the distribution business converse about issues such as brand management, piracy, and cloud computing.

Certain types of questions emerge for those wishing to construct taxonomies of distribution-related disclosures. For example: What does it mean to work in distribution? How does one draw distinctions between production and distribution or distribution and exhibition or retailing? Do such distinctions matter, and if so, to whom? Do industry workers tend to identify themselves as part of the distribution process? How often are such roles denied or elided? Does a specific type of responsibility or power come by self-identifying as a distributor?

Intellectual property attorneys, acquisitions executives, festival programmers, television schedulers, web technicians, and marketing assistants all could be identified as part of the distribution business. Importantly, distribution can be seen as taking place when “fan subbers” (i.e., amateur translators of movies and television series who operate outside sanctioned industrial channels) upload content to torrents, when truck drivers transport comic books from warehouses to retail stores, and when tablet devices are shipped from online retailers to individual residences. Determining the full range of intermediaries involved in distributive processes, and the types of influence they exercise over content individually or collectively, thus becomes a central research challenge.

**Getting Physical.** The industry’s obsession with finding ways to profit from content through new online platforms has yielded a great deal of coverage in journalistic outlets and at industry gatherings. Yet even if discourses of the digital dominate media reports, it is important to remember that distribution is a physical practice. Recent work by scholars on technological infrastructures provides a potent reminder that distribution networks have environmental and personal effects. Scholars such as Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, for example, have called attention to the struggles among communities, governments, and corporations over the placement of cell towers and underwater cables.\(^{20}\) Such emphases make clear that, notwithstanding industry rhetoric about the decline of physical media (e.g., DVDs, CDs), distribution practices have substantive material consequences. In a related vein, Ethan Tussey illustrates that, although companies such as Netflix and Comcast may generate the lion’s share of media attention for their streaming services, there are other industry and governmental stakeholders that affect the cost and quality of the media content (data) that we

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19 Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 347.

consume over the Internet. Tussey examines the important yet understudied impact of content development networks, such as Level 3, which contract with better-known brands such as Netflix. Level 3, he explains, hosts streaming media content on server farms and distributes this content to carriers such as Comcast and AT&T. These carriers, in turn, have threatened to increase their distribution fees, thereby violating net-neutrality principles and endangering the business models developed by companies such as Netflix (and, by extension, Level 3). Such discussions point to the political dimensions of distribution, dimensions that go beyond the standard discussions of conglomerate control and copyright ownership.

Much as studies of infrastructure can be integrated into a more expansive conceptualization of distribution, so, too, can a consideration of the distribution of hardware. Technology companies such as Sony and General Electric have disseminated devices and content for decades. However, newer technology companies like Apple, Google, and Amazon recently have entered into distribution in different ways. These companies are involved in transporting goods via mail, maintaining cloud storage systems, aggregating and promoting apps, and streaming third-party media content. The ways that such companies function as distributors of media—and the extent to which those activities intersect with their roles as retailer-exhibitors—merit further examination. As Jennifer Holt notes, the activities in which such companies engage not only complicate prior definitions of distribution but also pose new challenges for regulators.

**The Challenge Ahead: Circulating Our Ideas.** This essay only begins to hint at the breadth and depth of scholarship on distribution. What can be seen from this cursory survey of the literature is that the perceived “shortage” of scholarship stems in part from a lack of certainty about what exactly constitutes distribution today, as well as from a lack of conversation across different areas of Media Studies. Much can be gained by using the label of “distribution” to categorize work on topics such as piracy, infrastructure, market research, trade shows, cloud security, and library building. There is also a pedagogical benefit to organizing this scholarship under the heading of “distribution.” Whereas students often come into courses with a clear interest in learning about how media are made or consumed, the concept of distribution remains much murkier for them. Whether they seek to work in the media industry or to critique it, an understanding of distribution, in all its complexities, is vital. And as seductive as the rhetoric of disintermediation may be, it is a problematic discourse that needs to be explored and challenged far more extensively by both scholars and students of media distribution.

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Recognizing “Industry”

by Nitin Govil

Consider the field of Media Industries scholarship. A common origin story tells of a postwar divide between the diagnostic approaches of American social science and the Frankfurt School’s theories on media standardization, but the breadth of historical and anthropological inquiry into the media industries actually exceeds this polarity. Over the past few decades, new approaches have been employed, with roots in older paradigms. While ethnography, audience studies, and narrative approaches remain prominent in industry studies, we have also seen important work on the structural effects of global media domination and cultural histories of production studios informed by archival research. There is also a tradition of scholarship informed by a critique of neoclassical economics, highlighting labor, regulation, and the geographies of media production. For example, work on cultural industries and cultural economy retains the critical edge of social theory to understand contemporary industry transformations. “Creative industries” work focuses on the economic value of creativity in media economies, with an eye toward transforming industry policy and practice. “Production studies” sheds light on the practices of self-characterization through which cultural laborers situate their work within larger formations. Acknowledging the structural transformation of work under neoliberal regimes, media scholars have increasingly emphasized the movement between transnational sites of industrial activity. This has focused attention on global and local networks of distribution and circulation.

Despite their diversity, these signature methods and ruling paradigms are often divided according to macro-micro, formal-informal, and structure-agency typologies. The structure-agency dichotomy has been particularly influential. With a general orientation toward the regular rather than the singular, a focus on durability rather than impermanence, many industry research styles foreground the structural. For example, political economy and media sociology tend to focus on the relationships between media infrastructures and state and market institutions. Understanding industry as a social force is productive because it sensitizes us to the links between the inequitable distribution of economic resources and cultural domination. This kind of study tends to focus on more formal enumerative structures, which helps to explain why the national is a key metric in industry policy studies and other forms of structural analysis. “Micro” approaches like media
ethnography, in contrast, tend to focus on the person, bringing sociality and agency to our understanding of industry. Focusing on embodiment, subjectivity, and dramatic interaction, approaches like ethnography restore the older sense of industry as “a form of doing.” Enumeration is critical here, too, but micro approaches offer a more textured sense of aggregation, with attention to cultures of counting and an understanding of numbers as performative, semiological, and empirical.

Textbook pedagogies ossify differences between ways of studying the media industries, which leads to a perceived incommensurability between qualitative and quantitative work, empirical and interpretive methods, and institutional and textual analysis. Such easy antinomies have loosened given the general acknowledgment of the value of interdisciplinary and collaborative work. For example, although they were once caricatured as pitting the affirmative against the critical, cultural studies and political economy are now more likely to be seen as allied approaches, complementary rather than divergent.

Despite their diversity, lurking at the heart of many approaches is an attention to social and economic practices that happen within media industries rather than the activities and competencies that are constitutive of “industry.” One of the entrenched yet underexamined presumptions of Media Industries Studies, it seems to me, is the obviousness of its object. After all, most studies proceed from a general understanding of what an industry comprises, with a tacit sense of its boundaries and capacities. However, instead of taking industries as pre-given and stable formations, Film and Media Studies might take up a more foundational conceptual challenge. What are the provisional forms, sites, and practices that constitute media industries? What are the social, textual, political, and cultural infrastructures and interactions assembled under the sign of “industry”? What are these formal and informal processes of assembly, and how do exchange practices move in and out of industry status? In other words, how are industries “made up”?1 A lesson from the Indian film trade is instructive here.

Prakash “Pappu” Verma is an affable character, happy to chat about his leadership of the Indian Movie Stunt Artist Association. Ranjani Mazumdar and I have been conducting interviews at the association’s headquarters in the Bombay suburb of Andheri, gathering material for a book on the Indian film industries.2 We interviewed Pappu in his second-floor office; in the hall below us, a loose assembly of daredevils were gambling, smoking, and otherwise passing the time. Card-carrying members all, their physical congregation enacts and reflects their commonality. Association refers, then, to an institutionally bounded site, the formal sociality of assembly, and the experience of collective affinity.

Established in 1959, the Indian Movie Stunt Artist Association is one of more than twenty craft and labor unions represented by the Federation of Western India Cine Employees, an umbrella organization that represents more than one hundred thousand film and media workers, including writers, editors, cinematographers, sound recordists, costumers, hairdressers, makeup artists, and film extras or “junior artistes.”


2 Nitin Govil and Ranjani Mazumdar, The Indian Film Industry (London: British Film Institute, forthcoming).
The association, like most trade unions, advocates for wage fairness, improved work conditions, and insurance, unemployment, and retirement protection. How does such a group understand its activity, and how does it frame its authority? How is the association constituted? In response to our inquiries, Pappu provided us with the organization’s governing document.

As a written order, the constitution of the Indian Movie Stunt Artist Association contains procedures for setting subscription dues, rules for the expulsion of members, and compensation in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, or death. There are procedures for negotiating the going rate for the loss of a limb, incapacitation, and death, and rules for the distribution of retirement and death funds for all those workers not employed in the special high-risk categories of helicopter, car, swimming, and water-skiing stunt work. Section 4 of the constitution codifies age and height requirements for entry into the association, linking physical quantification with professional qualification, part of the stock in trade of these craft unions.

Although this document lays out a number of rules and regulations, such governing formalities only partially dictate everyday obligation. So, for example, the constitution contains an exemption on the height and age requirement for sons of current members. In section 40, which describes the duties of the treasurer and the distribution of resources, the typewritten sentence “funds will be disturbed” has been crossed out in pen and replaced with the handwritten phrase “funds will be disbursed.” This interoperability of governing procedure and everyday practice is exemplified by the constitution’s attention to money, which it defines as “cheques, promissory notes, bills of exchange, and hundies.” Dismissed by a nineteenth-century British colonial legality committed to preventing indigenous forms of exchange, hundies are trade and credit instruments that still support an informal infrastructure of microeconomic transactions.

Translation between the various “monetary genres” defined by the constitution can become contentious, attesting to the granularity of exchange. For example, in 2002, when a number of Bombay film producers started paying craft association workers by check, part of a broader project to rationalize the film industry through the use of “white” money rather than “black,” the members of the Indian Movie Stunt Artist Association mobilized and demanded cash payment. When push came to shove—and there was plenty of shoving to go around—the stunt person’s remuneration didn’t align with new forms of accounting. It turns out that rationalization is something of a risky business.

The uneasy alignment of informal transactions and formal industrial rationalization is a consequence of the Indian film trade’s recognition as an “industry” in the late 1990s. Historically, the Indian state has had an ambivalent relationship with the film trade, committing to punitive measures like entertainment taxes and censorship rather than supporting expansion and profitability. By conferring official “industry” status on the film business in 1998, the government opened new institutional financing channels, thereby linking Indian media capital to the global economy. Recent scholarship

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3 For a history of monetary genres, see Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
has seen industry recognition as a turning point in the corporatization of the Indian media. In particular, the institutional reconfiguration of Bombay cinema represents a significant shift in the relationship between the state and the film industry.

Before 1998, Indian cinema had been seeking recognition as an industry for decades. Of course, there had been historical structures in place, like producer-star systems, production and exhibition dynasties, and various efforts at corporatization. By conventional standards, commercial Indian cinema was an industry, defined by the built environment and distributing productive capacity through a division of cultural labor. However, industry status always seemed elusive, relegating Indian cinema to a kind of “not-yet” Hollywood.

A lack of formal enumeration produced the enduring idea that the Indian film trade suffered from a reflexivity deficit. As early as the 1920s, British colonial authorities and Indian film trade organizations focused attention on the politics of enumeration, understanding statistics as the administrative mechanism for greater managerial efficiency and centralized control. Yet in 1928, the Indian Cinematographic Committee would bemoan “the almost complete dearth of statistics and reliable information” required for “a proper understanding of the real position of the trade and the best methods for improving it.” Similarly, in a February 1935 speech organized by the then new Motion Picture Society of India, M. Visvesvaraya noted:

The great need of the industry is reliable statistics[,] . . . the yardstick by which every industry is measured. To get a correct idea of its condition, one must know such facts as the number of cinema theaters, the number of producing establishments, capital invested, value of machinery and raw materials used, profits earned, numbers employed in the industry, wages paid, the number of persons attending the theaters in a week, and other similar particulars. Reliable information under many of these heads is wanting at present.

Western opinion reflected this enumerative uncertainty. In reviewing the first systematic study of the Indian film industry, Franklin Fearing, of the University of California, Los Angeles, noted “the lamentable fact that this gigantic industry in India and elsewhere knows practically nothing about its product or why people use it.”

In the Indian film trade, various practices produced disparate sets of numbers that only occasionally combined to convey an overall sense of “an industry.” Although there were structures that accrued to the everyday activity of production and distribution, it was as if the diversity and informality of film practice could not be aggregated into an industry in the modern sense. Enumeration was central to this sense of

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7 Franklin Fearing, “Books and Journals of the Quarter,” *Quarterly of Film Radio and Television* 6, no. 1 (1951): 100. Fearing’s review considers Panna Shah’s *The Indian Film* (Bombay: Motion Picture Society of India, 1950).
aggregation, but burdened by chronically unreliable data, the film trade was thought to operate more like a casino. To count as an industry, the film trade would need to learn to count in a specific way. This rationalization of enumeration would enable Indian cinema to cross the threshold to become an industry.

The problem of enumeration is compounded by the hugeness of the numbers themselves. In a country of 1.25 billion people, some 6 million work in film-related fields, most without a guarantee of permanent employment. More than seven hundred films are made annually in twenty languages, and almost seventy thousand films have been produced in thirty languages since the early 1930s. Billions of tickets are sold every year in India, and countless more overseas. The conventional thinking was not only that industry recognition would confer a more stable economic status on the Indian film trade but also that international finance would follow the implementation of new accounting practices. Shepherded by a state eager to recruit foreign direct investment, Indian film finally achieved “industry” status.

However, just because a threshold has been reached doesn’t mean that other ways of recognizing industry need to be forgotten. In the Indian case, “industry” was achieved rather than presumed, processual rather than preordained. Following this logic, can we depart from understanding industry simply as a form of production and focus instead on the production of “industry” itself? What might it mean to understand industry as a conceptual construct that does the work of drawing and illustrating connections among diverse ways of knowing and doing? In moving beyond an understanding of industry as a metaphor of containment, we might break through the enumerative and enunciative constraints that structure much media research.

In Epistemic Cultures, an insightful examination of expertise in the sciences, Karin Knorr-Cetina asks us to “[look] upon scientists and other experts as enfolded in construction machineries, in entire conjunctions of conventions and devices that are organized, dynamic, thought about (at least partially), but not governed by single actors.”8 This focus on variability in knowledge practices once considered locked up inside the black box of scientific action offers an intriguing analogy for the study of media industries. How can we introduce indeterminacy into the study of industry? Can we be emboldened to think beyond media industries as institutional settings that precede or contain forms of sociality and experience? We need to broaden the range of practices that count as industrial. So let’s begin with a more dynamic sense of industries as social and textual arrangements, sites of enactment, and other dramaturgies of interaction, reflection, and reflexivity.

While it is a formal document, the stunt artist’s constitution suggests a makeshift arrangement, not least because it imagines a political economy based on the indeterminate status of money. Here, industry is re-cognized: not as a preexisting structure of calculation but as a way of figuring things out. If enterprising daredevils are willing to bet life and limb on such a provisional conception of industry, what do we risk in taking the plunge?

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primary strength of the Media Industries paradigm is the opportunity it provides to rupture our conceptual silos. Instead of categorization by medium, or technology, or textual form—cinema, television, radio, print, recordings—a Media Industries approach directs attention to the ways media function in the real world: as an interlinked, hybrid economy of activities, representations, and uses that spreads across technological platforms, media professions, textual forms, and audience experiences. This has been made increasingly obvious as traditional media shift to digital forms: what was formerly united industrially, but still semidistinct textually, now converges visibly on the screens that surround us every day. Cinema and television meet on Netflix and online digital channels, joining print and graphics in an integrated interface, often employing the same gateway as that used for gaming. Narratives flow across video-game, cinema, television, and online print and graphic platforms, while traditional print sources diversify in their online operations into video interviews, audio podcasts, news footage, and documentary. Yet often left to the side is a further extension of digital convergence, barely acknowledged in media study: the new soundwork industry.

I use the term soundwork to designate media forms that are primarily aural, employing the three basic elements of sonic expression—music, speech, and noise1—to create a lively economy of sound-based commodities and institutions, ranging from radio to recorded sound to, at the more visual limit, the soundtracks that accompany visual media. Sound studies scholars have argued for many years that our predominant cultural emphasis on the visual has exiled consideration of large sectors of the media industry to the margins, particularly the dynamic and powerful fields of popular music and radio.2 Out of sight was out of mind for the Media Studies field, cutting off consideration of significant industry and creative sectors. However, today, sound has become a screen medium on sites like iTunes, Pandora, and Spotify; in podcasts and online archives and radio streams; and in new hybrid

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forms like YouTube, audio slideshows, and digital soundscapes. Now Media Industry Studies has a chance to fully incorporate this vital component of traditional media concerns, leading to a reconceptualization of the ways that industry sectors work together to produce innovative work that crosses traditional boundaries.

Sound-based media are an integral, profitable, enormously popular segment of the media industry; to continue omitting them from consideration unduly limits the field. The new digital soundwork challenges older media categorizations and shows how sound-based media integrates with the visual on both industrial and textual levels. Sound industries have remained largely invisible to media industry scholars because of their unique ephemerality and lack of material presence. As this moment of digital ascendance transforms sound media into screen media, scholars have at last begun to perceive the unique and distinctive texts, practices, and institutions that produce aural texts consumed by millions. Sound’s ephemerality has always presented a considerable barrier to study; now the new digital materiality of sound presents us with an opportunity to recognize this considerable lacuna in our research and to address the media industries more completely and comprehensively.

In the United States, much of the new soundwork has been happening in the public radio sector, recently revived and brought to new life not only by converging industries but also by converging screens. The past two decades have seen an incredible expansion in US public radio, enabled by its transformation from an invisible, ephemeral sonic experience to a more tangible, fixed materialization on our digital screens. The new radio soundwork comprises not only innovative programs and modes of listening, attracting millions of listeners and often feeding into cinema and television forms, but also a transformation of public-sector media distribution and economics. What follows is a short exploration of a few key aspects of the American public radio industry in the digital era, to illuminate not only the digital transformation of soundwork but also the significant role that nonprofit and public media play as part of the media industry today—not surprising to those from countries with a strong public service tradition, but often given short shrift in US media industry study.

One of radio’s earliest creative geniuses, the BBC’s Lance Sieveking, began his 1934 book *The Stuff of Radio* with a section titled “Ghastly Impermanence of the Medium.” Perhaps no one is more entitled to bemoan early radio’s ephemerality than Sieveking. Although he produced hundreds of original radio compositions, many of them highly experimental montages of live and recorded sound mixed through a specially designed “dramatic control board” and transmitted live over the BBC network, few were recorded and none survive. For his twenty years of innovative work, only a few scripts, scrapbooks of sketches and clippings, and his long-out-of-print book remain: the rest is silence. This was the fate of the bulk of radio production until the mid-1930s, and it emblematizes the many aspects of sound’s persistent ephemerality.

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that have kept creative soundwork in a secondary cultural position through much of its history.\(^5\)

Even as music recordings replaced live studio production as the main content of radio, its “ghastly impermanence” remained. Radio—streamed soundwork—lacked any kind of permanent, visible, lasting record of its presence, aside from the numbers on the radio dial. Radio had no theater marquee, no headlines on display at the newsstand, no shiny posters; although its invisible signals might saturate the atmosphere all around, they could not be lastingly perceived or returned to. Unlike television, which generated an entire industry of published guides for its network and station schedules and which used established print sources like newspapers to lend visual fixity to an ever-changing flow of programs, radio broadcasting went largely invisible, undetectable except as numbers on the dial, and facing a constant battle for simple awareness.

Early public radio, dedicated to long-form programs, struggled in particular with this problem. Locating and listening to long-form radio was an arduous and arcane proposition through the mid-1990s. Once missed, a program could not be heard again; titles and credits were announced once or twice and then lost to memory; complex and tightly constructed soundworks passed rapidly before the ears and vanished, never to be heard again. Under these conditions, a coherent and sustainable sound culture simply could not develop.\(^6\) When digital platforms emerged in the late 1990s, radio stations of all kinds were quick to see their potential. Finally, radio might acquire a material interface to present to the world, a permanent marker of its presence as well as an alternative delivery system.

Internet radio streaming began in 1994, accelerated with the development of audio software in the late 1990s, and then exploded in the early 2000s as broadcasters and the Recording Industry Association of America worked out rights and royalty issues through SoundExchange. This went hand in hand with the increased materiality and visibility that a screen presence allowed. Digital streaming brought radio stations as well as independent providers onto the Web, where existing practices could be made visible and material, substituting a coherent screen-based interface for a set of prior practices that had been scattered and evanescent. Next, and more slowly, came the realization of exactly what this new convergence of sight and sound could do to alter soundwork completely. Radio was now a screen medium, possessing extended capabilities that posed an enormous challenge to producers used to working with sound in its traditional forms. Radio became a digital form—a shifting display of textual and visual information—even as it remained a sound experience.

And more screens were on the way. In January 2001, Apple introduced its iTunes service, the first commercially successful Web-based interface for downloading audio and video files via computer screens. Later that year the Apple iPod debuted, providing

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\(^6\) In countries with a well-established public service broadcasting tradition, as has prevailed throughout much of Europe in particular, the permanence and high profile of national radio services and their supporting material practices—such as high-circulation printed program guides and a tradition of published criticism—made the invisibility of radio less acute, and audio forms flourished in a way that simply was not supported in the United States.
the first small portable screen through which music could be accessed. By early 2004, podcasting had emerged on the scene, a new alternative distribution route for serially produced programming. Drawing on the ease of digital audio production, combined with syndicating software and Web-based distribution, podcasting exploded in 2005 as iTunes version 4.9 began podcast hosting. Millions of podcasts are produced today, hosted on a wide range of sites, distributed free or for small subscription fees. The introduction of the iPhone and other smart phones beginning in 2007 supplied yet another screen through which audio work could be discovered and accessed, introducing the now-ubiquitous “app” as an interface; not only the iPad, introduced in 2009, but other tablet and e-readers with audio capacity extend app-based soundwork on to yet another platform, along with the capacity to connect to Web-based services. Today, radio happens when you access a website or activate an app, click on a “Play” arrow or touch an icon, plug in your headphones and set off down the street, or lean back in front of your computer. These screen interfaces are radio, as much as the audio stream itself.

Screen-based radio—this rapidly evolving combination of digital production, Web-based distribution, and mobile digital reception—set off a revolution in soundwork that has not yet been adequately assessed. Public broadcasters, with the weight of national organization and funding behind them, moved quickly into Web-based operations, perceiving clearly what this new digital realm had to offer (just as they had with satellite distribution three decades earlier). National Public Radio (NPR) began streaming online and digitally archiving programs as early as 1996. Jonathan Kern, one of the few to address the impact of the digital on radio production, considers the advent of online archiving to be the most profound change, giving radio not only a spatial presence but also a temporal fixity. This allowed soundwork that would have been almost completely inaccessible after its first broadcast to be preserved both as audio and as transcribed text; soundwork could be retrieved, searched by keyword or topic, and used to document the past on a day-to-day basis, in a way that only material or visual media, such as newspapers, magazines, and films, could have been before. Digital sound archives will have an enormous impact on the way that media scholars, as well as historians, work in the future.

In addition to highlighting online archiving, Kern points to several major ways that the digital screen has allowed the radio industry to enhance and extend the scope of its work. First, and most obviously, online materials can provide a new visual dimension to audio material, from photographs and videos to charts and graphs. The audio slide show has become an increasingly popular hybrid form, found on sound and print media sites alike. Graphic display and organization of visual and audio components of a radio station’s offerings make an immense difference—something traditional broadcasters are little used to dealing with. Program makers must become adept with digital cameras and video editing, and graphics editors have been added to radio station staffs. Some radio programs are also available as video productions, as with NPR’s Tiny Desk Concerts (2008–); video clips of films and television shows can be added to reviews; and footage of interviews and events can accompany the basic audio story.

This also indicates the way that digital platforms can extend and deepen soundwork far beyond the usually limited time slots of streaming radio. The entire, unedited version of an interview, long stretches of actuality sound recorded on location, entire speeches and public presentations, aspects of a story that get cut from the final version—all of these can find a permanent home on the Web, broken down into easily accessible bits and searchable via transcription. Finally, digital platforms present a set of interactive potentials of great value to producers and listeners alike. Besides audio comments and solicited contributions from listeners, which might be incorporated into programs or stories, listeners can participate in surveys, download materials, take part in online discussions, and find their own way through audio, visual, and textual materials in a unique sequence. These are transformations that affect all forms of media in the digital era, with the less expensive, less bandwidth-intensive field of sound leading the way.

All of these capacities have sparked a revolution in soundwork. Today, more original audio production takes place in both professional and amateur venues than was ever possible before, enabled by digital audio production tools now available on nearly every computer, new distribution sites, and new ways to access and listen. Although this work ranges from the simplest podcast to the most elaborate digital multimedia, sound-based serial drama experiments, its most successful manifestation lies in the revival of the radio feature, a form whose definition is contested but that dates back to radio’s earliest years. Lance Sieveking created features by mixing actuality and dramatized elements together in a live theater of sound; his inheritors in the US context would include Norman Corwin, once hailed as the “poet laureate” of radio, and documentarist Pare Lorentz, with his daring 1936 production Ecce Homo. Combining a fundamentally documentary concern with dramatized production techniques, the radio feature grew out of the arsenal of creative innovations used by early practitioners to represent reality convincingly within the confines of the live studio.

Today’s radio feature might be best exemplified by two of the most heralded programs on NPR in recent years: Ira Glass’s This American Life (WBEZ, 1995–) and its science-based compatriot, Radiolab (WNYC, 2002–), created by Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich. Both hold tightly to their claims on factual realism and the documentary aesthetic, but both create sonic story worlds that employ a complex palette of audio elements, including music, sound effects, intricate layering, gemlike editing, and narrative techniques ranging from the intimate confessional essay to the dramatic sound portrait. Both programs make full and creative use of the visibility and materiality that digital platforms enable. Their websites are elaborate, visually playful extensions of the soundwork of the show, providing background information, extensive archives, and various ways of interacting with the material.

These two nationally distributed and wildly successful programs are only the tip of the iceberg of innovations in a soundwork industry that supports a wide range of artists, distributors, and access points. Digital sites like Transom, Public Radio Exchange, and the Third Coast International Audio Festival provide a venue for independent

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sound artists to display their work, offer it up for sale and distribution, receive critical commentary, and find resources to enable their efforts. Such work would have been lost in the ephemeral streaming flow of radio in years past, heard once and passed over forever, or perhaps collected in specialty catalogs of audiocassette collectors and sound enthusiasts.

Transom, founded by radio producer Jay Allison, calls itself “a showcase and workshop for new public radio.” It profiles radio artists and introduces new soundwork, sponsors seminars and conferences, encourages critical commentary and essays, and provided the inspiration for the even more ambitious Public Radio Exchange, or PRX. With the avowed mission to “help make public radio more public,” PRX works as a showcase, a distribution exchange, and a rights allocator, bringing independent sound artists together with stations primarily in the nonprofit sector. In summary, “PRX is an open system— anyone can join, publish, license content, and earn royalties. Hundreds of public, community, college, and Low Power FM (LPFM) stations buy pieces on PRX for their local air.” It hosts a streaming channel to exhibit new work, called Public Radio Remix, and develops apps for public radio stations and programs. The archiving and access system of PRX is one of the most inventive around, allowing users to search not only by topic and by format but also by tone. Categories include “amusing,” “dark,” “quirky,” “raw,” “sound-rich,” “humorous,” “up-beat,” and even “Fresh Air–ish.”

The new soundwork industry is alive and flourishing as never before. Sound’s convergence with the digital has transformed this understudied sphere of media production, enabling new forms of creativity, distribution, funding, access, and exchange. And where the accessible, low-budget world of sound has gone, other media sectors are sure to follow. It is time to fully incorporate soundwork into the Media Industry Studies paradigm, across both commercial and nonprofit sectors, and to recognize the many sites, shapes, and moments where it occurs. This will enable media industry scholars to take full account of the parameters of their field of study, allowing consideration of synergies between sound and screen, between public and private, and between amateur and professional, as never before possible. It will finally and irrevocably overcome the visual bias so predominant in Media Industry Studies up to the present.

Two-Way Mirrors: Looking at the Future of Academic-Industry Engagement

by JENNIFER HOLT

As the study of screen industries evolves, so do our modes of engagement, potential points of access, and collaborative experiences with this dynamic object of study. Interactions between the industry (in its various forms) and the academy are a source of new opportunities and information, often serving as inspiration for future dimensions of the knowledge circulated by the field. They also have a flip side in the methodological, discursive, and even ethical challenges that they present for Film and Media Studies scholars. It is the opportunities embedded in these complications, and the new terrain they present for industry researchers, that I am interested in, for what they might teach us as we look toward the future of this discipline. Going forward, our job will be to strike the right balance between being critical and being engaged with our object of study as we cultivate more terrain for collaboration. I believe we can, and should, create more research projects that involve the industry in some form. Further, we can embrace these projects as potential funding models, sources of rich information and untapped archives, and occasions for disciplinary self-reflection.

Interviews have always provided academics with a certain measure of industry interaction. There is an extensive literature in the field that has utilized ethnographic approaches and journalistic tactics to glean information from primary sources; John Caldwell’s *Production Culture*, Todd Gitlin’s *Inside Prime Time*, and Vicki Mayer’s *Below the Line* stand as just a few excellent examples.1 Academics have also long been aware of the hazards associated with the industry interview: the need to sift through “spin” and promotion, to filter interpersonal and institutional agendas, to balance the desire for rapport and an ongoing relationship with the desire to ask tough questions, to translate scholarly concerns for a business-oriented subject, and to navigate the myriad other dimensions and dynamics that can mitigate the value of

these encounters. Indeed, an excellent *Cinema Journal* In Focus section has already been devoted to the practitioner interview and its attendant challenges.\(^2\)

In addition to the one-on-one interview, there is an expanding list of options offering varying degrees of industry engagement. Some of these formalized interactions are hosted for academics by industry constituents. For example, in the United States, there are a small number of established “faculty fellowships,” such as the weeklong Faculty Seminar put on by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Foundation, the Faculty Fellowship to the National Association of Television Program Executives (NATPE) conference, and the Visiting Professor Program at the Advertising Education Foundation. These events provide valuable immersive experiences for faculty, and they create space for dialogue with industry professionals, offer exposure to different discursive constructions of industry trends, and often lead participants to recalibrate their understanding of certain industry dynamics (and how they are skillfully spun by public relations machines).

There is also a wide variety of less cultivated but equally productive arenas for screen studies scholars to interact with industry professionals. Dr. Jonathan Zittrain of Harvard was recently named chairman of the Federal Communications Commission’s Open Internet Advisory Committee.\(^3\) While it is the rarest of academics who is appointed to lead federal policy commissions, many have testified at congressional hearings, in legal cases involving industry matters, and in front of regulatory bodies. Others have attended events such as the “upfronts” and the Television Critics Association Press Tour, as well as annual conventions held by MIPCOM, MIP-TV, NATPE, and the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). Examples of scholarly work that has grown out of such interactions include Amanda Lotz’s exploration of the upfronts and Tim Havens’s analysis of the global television trade.\(^4\)

Still more academics have participated in industry-focused forums such as those at the South by Southwest (SXSW) film and music festival and conference, the Produced By conference, the Media That Matters conference organized by the Center for Social Media, the annual congress of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF), the Game Developers Conference (GDC), and the Adult Video News (AVN) Adult Entertainment Expo, among many others. Increasingly, there are also conferences and symposia that specifically seek to integrate media scholars and industry figures into panels and put them in dialogue with one another about various aspects of screen studies (for example, the annual Transmedia-Hollywood event cosponsored by the University of Southern California [USC] and the University of California, Los Angeles [UCLA]; Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s [MIT] long-standing Futures

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\(^3\) The committee consists of activist groups and academics, as well as Internet and telecommunications companies such as AT&T, Comcast, and Netflix, among others.


The Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) brings academics, archivists, vendors, and other industry members together each year at its annual conference. UNESCO holds various events, such as the international Memory of the World in the Digital Age conference, which has engaged academic and industry constituents to explore issues affecting preservation and cultural heritage. Additionally, there are the hybrid spaces of film festivals and media markets all over the globe, which present unique opportunities to network informally with industry professionals while also attending or speaking on panels and workshops. And, of course, there are the Twitter conversations among academics, show runners, journalists, and critics that are growing more prevalent as social networking expands and provides relatively easy access and neutral spaces for different communities to exchange ideas.

I see these myriad forums for academic and industry engagement, regardless of frequency and scale, as becoming only more significant for screen industry studies in the future. Particularly in the United States, where there is a lack of governmental funding for research in the arts and a relative dearth of industrial sponsorship for the type of critical media study with which Cinema Journal readers are likely to be engaged, our future scholarship will continue to benefit from, and grapple with, these many opportunities and complicated primary sources. The relentless privatization of higher education inevitably extends to research funding as well and, in turn, will affect the ways in which industry scholars adjust our frameworks for publicly presenting our work and ourselves.

To be sure, there is a relatively small amount of critical media studies research that has been directly funded by industry in the form of sponsored and/or collaborative projects. Although the majority of this funding has been directed toward research in the quantitative, media-effects tradition, for the purposes of this essay I am interested in exploring models for funded research that have foundations in critical and/or analytical perspectives more commonly found in humanities disciplines. A limited sampling of institutions that have produced work in this vein would include the Education Arcade and the Media Lab, both at MIT; USC’s Interactive Media Division and Entertainment Technology Center; UCSB’s Carsey-Wolf Center; and the Institute for Screen Industries Research at the University of Nottingham. I have been an eager participant in this type of initiative, codirecting the Media Industries Project at the Carsey-Wolf Center, which is working to cultivate a greater space for the continued development of academic and industry dialogue and collaboration. At

UCSB, we are currently engaged in a project with Warner Bros. Digital Distribution to examine connected viewing and the changes that digital distribution and socially networked communication have generated for content, audiences, business models, and even policy frameworks. Interestingly, some prehistory of connected viewing could be traced directly to that very same studio; QUBE was one of the pioneering experiments in interactive television that originated in 1978 at Warner Bros., and yet this historical link (and its lessons) were absent from the executives’ conceptualizations of connected viewing.

This project did not come from any established model, nor did it have any kind of road map. It grew out of our endeavor to create more resources for industry research by conducting a series of extensive interviews on the digital distribution revolution and archiving them on our website. An intriguing conversation with Warner Bros. Digital Distribution president Thomas Gewecke that was part of this effort turned into discussions of how academic approaches to studying connected viewing could benefit the industry perspective—and deliver something going beyond the in-house market research that would be, in Gewecke’s words, “meaningful, but not obvious.” We wrote a proposal for funding and, thanks in large part to Gewecke’s expansive vision, our initial meeting has snowballed into multiple conferences, an edited anthology, and funding for thirteen research projects that engage a spectrum of issues including the collector’s ethos, the complexities of windowing strategies, second-screen apps for gaming, and social media trends in China.

These experiences have led me to think about some of the more prominent challenges and questions that have developed out of the relationship between industry scholars and their object of study. In what remains of this short essay, I would like to examine the challenges that have begun to resonate for me most profoundly as academia and media industries become more “intimate” with one another, and as it grows more incumbent on scholars to become fluent in multiple registers when articulating their research questions and goals to a potential industry audience.

Primarily, marketplace considerations loom large in all phases of development and execution of a research project. Funding proposals are forced to weigh issues and avenues of inquiry that are of interest to corporate bottom lines more heavily in order to attract attention from industry partners. This subjects industry-funded research to charges of instrumentality and ideological bias, or even of veering into applied research. Clearly, pursuing research purely based on its marketability could corrupt academia’s core values and functions in society. Further, being funded by the research subject potentially sacrifices the independence, criticality, and freedom from market pressures that are vital for scholarly inquiry to thrive.

While these concerns are certainly issues to be mindful of, it would be naive to suggest that academic work has ever been entirely free of market dictates (although it

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is perhaps more pronounced in the era of 140-character promotion). Nevertheless, research that carries some form of commercial appeal is not inherently troublesome; it could also generate some significant opportunities for the field of Media Industry Studies. In fact, close collaborations offer many occasions to engage in dialogue that can ultimately shape popular, academic, and industry perceptions. These are opportunities to present the value of historical, critical, and interdisciplinary academic research for understanding contemporary trends; to advocate for the importance of longitudinal research to explaining cycles of innovation and audience expectations; to articulate critical industry studies as delivering essential information not traditionally provided by in-house market research divisions; and to use scholarly perspectives to illuminate connections between market-based concerns about media policy and the public interest concerns championed by activist groups.

Many of the conferences and events mentioned here offer platforms for this kind of dialogue that can also serve as forums for articulating our own contributions and perspectives as worthy of more widespread consideration, funding, and support from the public and private sectors. It is in this terrain that I see a great deal more possibility for industry collaboration, collaboration that should not necessarily make us anxious about the commercialization of academic research. In fact, the ability to have our research resonate for patrons, audiences, and collaborative partners that extend beyond our campus is one of the most exciting and increasingly necessary dimensions of our intellectual labor. This necessarily leads to issues of translation or to the framing of scholarly research and projects in ways that render our lines of inquiry relevant to a wide spectrum of concerns that transcend the university. This is not merely an issue for the development phase of a project; it also relates to the discourse we employ and the subsequent marketing that is done by scholars, universities, and academic presses.

There are certainly numerous additional dynamics in play that fall outside the relationship of projects to the demands of “the market” and their framing and subsequent promotion. We must also consider, for example, “informal media economies” and the blurring of distinctions between amateur and professional media producers that has grown so prominent. These gray areas that have developed as a result of proliferating digital technologies, new distribution platforms, and evolving consumer and fan cultures represent additional spaces for intervention and analysis. They also demand alternative frameworks for such analysis and will continue to present methodological challenges to industry scholars that, when addressed, will undoubtedly result in more established parameters and tools for conducting industry research. Doing such work outside the United States requires an additional understanding of the vagaries of the public service mandate as it affects the disposition of the industry toward that

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10 See, for example, Stuart Cunningham, “Emergent Innovation through the Coevolution of Informal and Formal Media Economies,” *Television & New Media* 13, no. 5 (September 2012): 415–430.
public and the academics in it. Academic screen industry research in Europe, for example, benefits from more state funding on the one hand and confronts a high degree of suspicion toward industry collaboration on the other hand. This is yet one more challenge—and opportunity—for international scholars making an argument for the public value of their research.

The future of screen studies is one that will surely be replete with questions like these, and the permeable borders described here are also likely to grow even more porous. As scholars and development offices pursue additional forms of private funding for research, particularly funding emanating from media industries, the foundational work of communicating the rewards of such scholarship (for the public and private sector) will certainly become integral to the research itself. Academics have increasingly been forced to justify the “value” of the humanities in the face of recent budget crises. Although we don’t necessarily want any more practice, articulating the public contributions of screen industry studies is a pitch that scholars will have plenty of time to perfect as we continue to broaden our horizons of interaction and engagement. *


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