

## **Key Concepts in Production Studies**

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“Key concepts” are a virtually universal component of every field of study or endeavor, presenting essential terms that foster greater cohesion and understanding. However, key concepts are not only words and definitions; they’re the hubs around which discussion circulates, propelling ideas into fields of knowledge and politics. Rather than function as definitive end points, they are more usefully thought of as beginnings: discursive sparks to deeper and wider consideration. In that capacity, they can be immensely useful to the development of fields of inquiry and practice. The many *Key Concepts in...* volumes in the humanities and sciences attest to their utility, as does the very existence of Wikipedia (which, in principle at least, exemplifies the ideal of key concepts as open source knowledge generation).

While many fields are knee-deep in established key concepts, “production studies”—the emerging field of concentration on creative labor—seemingly functions as a loose amalgamation of cultural studies, political economy, and anthropology. It is gaining stature as a sub-field in media and cultural studies, but still faces conceptual difficulties in an academic environment focused on the relatively exclusive domains of “theory” and “practice,” i.e., on “analyzing media” and “making media,” respectively. Students may typically take (and curricula typically offer) different courses on media production, media aesthetics, and the economic organization of media industries, but they are largely unable, in almost every program (outside of the UK and Australia at least), to take a course that focuses on analyzing how industrial organization functions “on the ground” to shape the aesthetic practices of production and the choices and fates of production workers.

Much of this problem stems from the relative lack of scholarly and practitioner attention given to matters of creative labor. For the former it is generally off the table (in favor of the

finished text), or abstracted as coarse political economy; for the latter, creativity is often taken as given and ahistorical. The issue of creative labor per se is only considered when it becomes unavoidable, as in last year's Writer's Guild strike. However, if creative labor was another, equally valid point of focus, if entire "production studies" courses and methods were developed, if terms like "showrunner" or "below-the-line" were as standard as terms like "elliptical editing," or "f-stop," then the study of production could take a more central role in media analysis and practice.

This is where "key concepts" come in. The development of key concepts in production studies could, as they have done in many other fields, help solidify important terms and methods, allowing students, researchers, practitioners, and activists to speak—and expand—the same language. Much of this language may be alien to most of these groups. For example, interview- and survey-based ethnographic research methods derived from sociology and anthropology present considerable challenge to those trained more in textual and historical analysis. However, by presenting these concepts alongside relevant examples of their application (as several key works in production studies have done in recent years), scholars can provide models and provoke wider discussions about the utility of particular methods, and the definitions of the concepts themselves.

Moreover, a greater focus on production studies would help enhance the understanding of lived media culture at a time of enormous change in media production and consumption (including the complex intertwining of the two). Key concepts, from this point in time, could develop more dynamically as media practices, texts, and industries change, allowing for an increasingly shared language with which to explore issues of creative labor in all their variety. For example, the concept of "media labor" itself can be connected to traditional notions of labor,

but also productively expanded—as a key concept—into concerns of technology, subcontracting, consumption-as-labor, and globalization, as well as others.

The study of twenty-first century media should certainly build from the study of twentieth century media. However, the established approaches and methods of last-century media studies may not always be adequate to the task of understanding media now. A greater focus on *production*—in all its permutations—will insure that media studies does not remain locked in established paradigms, but that it continues to challenge itself to better understand, and potentially change, the way media is produced, consumed, and lived today. The continual generation of key concepts in production studies will help build the common ground upon which that field can grow.