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## **The Media Industries and Media Studies**

**How might our histories of the media industries shift in light of contemporary changes? Can we speak of film, television, and music as distinct industries in this age of convergence? What theoretical frameworks and methods can be employed in conducting analyses of these industry/ies? What challenges do researchers encounter in studying the media industries and how might these challenges be overcome?**

The rapid and sweeping changes brought about by media convergence over the last several decades pose a problem for the critical media scholar. These shifts are especially problematic for those of us concerned the role of capital and ideology in the working of media, of course, as questions about hegemony naturally follow from news of the further consolidation of media ownership among an ever-smaller group of conglomerates. Yet even more broadly, the convergence of media represents a challenge to the project of text-specific analysis writ large; in an era when film, television, and music can all be subsumed under the moniker of “content,” how are we to effectively harness the available methodological tools in order to understand changes to the media landscape?

Yet consolidation within the media industries, when considered from another vantage, represents an opportunity for scholars to address the dominant position of media within culture in post-industrial society. Consolidation has had impacts beyond the business of media; its effects have been textual, as well; at the same time that film studios continue to re-orient their perspective to include (and even privilege) a non-theatrical audience, broadcasters have come to embrace “cinematic” television, through the adoption of conventions like widescreen aspect ratios. Other examples abound, creating the need for scholars in this age of convergence to

develop methodological approaches that can account for the ways in which media, both as commodity but also as text, have converged.

That we convene to talk about “media industries” suggests the extent to which we are presently oriented towards narrating the history of media consolidation as an industrial phenomenon. Given the extent to which much of this history has happened off-screen, so to speak, in boardrooms rather than theaters, we should perhaps not be surprised by this. Such accounts often take the form of base-superstructure analysis; as we see further consolidation among the means of production, the output of cultural objects becomes ever more homogenized, and the traditional divisions between television, film, and music become ever more blurred.

I want to suggest here that while there is certainly merit to this argument, the emphasis on cultural production obscures what is perhaps an even more important phenomenon, which is how practices of media reception have changed to accommodate the changing role of the media text in the era of consolidation. Taking a reception-oriented perspective to media consolidation allows at least two benefits for the media scholar, I think. For one, it provides a methodological framework for considering media texts across a variety of different cultural forms. As importantly, it imposes a test of salience on media studies.

At present, it is exceedingly difficult to speak in generalities about how consolidation has affected the media landscape, but saliency offers a possible outlet for doing so. For instance: the case can convincingly be made, as Eric Klinenberg recently has, that the lack of a diversity of ownership in the news business leads to a profound and fundamental decline in the quality of the product produced, and a homogenization of “content” across the country. In this case, consolidation of ownership is most certainly a salient issue for the media scholar. Yet at the same time, the identical regulatory and business climate that gave rise to media conglomerates like

Clear Channel, Time Warner and Sony has also seen the re-emergence of the niche, in film, television, and music. In fact, the Andersonian notion of the niche market is premised on the notion of scale, difficult to achieve in an analog world but increasingly available in an era of digital media. It is harder to speak of consolidation as being an unqualified negative (as sometimes seems the temptation in media studies) when we consider that a number of the most significant subcultural texts of the last two decades – think of Nirvana’s *Nevermind*, *Pulp Fiction*, Notorious B.I.G.’s *Ready to Die*, *Freaks and Geeks* or any number of other examples – were produced under the auspices of multinational conglomerates. This is the phenomenon labeled by A.O. Scott, speaking specifically in the film context, as the “rise of the middle-sized movie”: the media text produced with conglomerate capital but intended for niche audiences. In these cases, the saliency of consolidation is an open question. Were it that the profit-maximizing strategy for multinational corporations was to produce a steady diet of only *High School Musical* iterations and boy and girl pop bands, we might legitimately wonder about the ill effects of consolidation on the cultural marketplace. But by some measures, we have actually seen an increase in diversity since the late 1980s, at the same time that consolidation has continued apace. Adopting a reception-oriented approach allows us to refine our analysis of consolidation by considering its impacts on the media consumer.