

Managing Media Production in the Age of Convergence

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Per the prompt, I don't actually believe that writing about media production has become all that much more difficult or complex in the age of convergence. To a large degree, the difficulty and complexity has always been there. The tensions discussed in the prompt simply highlight this difficulty and complexity because, due to convergence-related issues, they are less self-contained than tensions, say, between film and television productions in the early 1950's. This shift, along with the rise to prominence of production studies and an increased access to media productions and producers over the last decade, has resulted in our growing awareness of the large number of factors that contribute to any one decision about any one media text. But I think that what makes our work so difficult is also what makes it exciting, diverting researchers away from the kind of reductive thinking that would normally make these complexities more manageable for us, but that ultimately limits the usefulness and accuracy of our explanations.

The particular complexity of the production study in which I am currently engaged—an examination of female dominated sectors of media production—has been that I don't think my most important questions about the place of gender in the industrial logic of contemporary media production can be answered by looking strictly at the contemporary period. So at present my work concerns a group of paper-based, low status “women's” jobs in the studio system of the 1920's-50's and the legacy of that gendered labor in the contemporary media industry. For this work I draw from a number of different frameworks and concepts, including existing media production studies, labor history, feminist historiography, ethnographic method, and social and psychological theory (eg actor-network theory, constraint theory—concepts that I think can shed light on creative systems). I use these and other frameworks to interpret a broad variety of evidence (house organs, fan magazines, personal papers, instructional manuals, tell-all's) because, even when I have corporate documents that describe the system of creative production explicitly, those sources need a lot of context in order to be truly understood. Studios, networks and other large-scale producers of creative texts, are huge systems governed not only by written documents but also by networks of distributed cognition that, in the case of the film and television industry, have evolved over a century and been passed down from worker to worker, verbally and through industrial texts and rituals. At the same time, this system is continuously being retrofitted and cobbled together with new industrial practices as times and technology change. So for me, as frustrating as it sounds, context can only be found through examining multiple perspectives *from* multiple perspectives. In this sense, a studio newsletter gossip column is just as important to the overall picture I'm creating as direct statements from a studio head. This isn't to say that everything is weighed equally...just that nothing can be weighed accurately without first surveying this spectrum of evidence. This is the same approach that I take when examining the contemporary industry, where the evolution and adaptation process continues daily, and new media, production sectors, mythology and technology accumulate and are heaped on top of the existing mass. Here, in order to explain what I'm seeing in interviews and on set visits, I look at things like practitioner blogs,

industrial networking organizations, twitter accounts and, of course, media texts produced by workers for themselves, each other, and the public.

Finally, to organize all of this evidence and guide my analysis, I rely on concepts of industrial mythology and self-theory as outlined by John Caldwell and, most importantly for me, as interpreted through my own experiences working in the film and television industry. I came to academia from film and TV production work, have continued to have one foot in production all along, and live in an industry household, so using my own experience as a guide in construing evidence was unavoidable for me. However, I believe that it may become unavoidable for all of us, as we continue to develop our understanding of media production, and as the various media industries become increasingly intertwined. It will no longer be enough simply to pitch a tent at the edge of a media village in order to accurately observe its occupants when a clearer understanding of that media village can be gained from the inside. To my mind, the detail and depth of understanding gained from this sort of hands-on research outweighs the problematic aspects of said research, and will be increasingly important as we move forward, helping us to explain the system of media production to each other, increasing the significance of our explanations outside of the academy and, perhaps most importantly, enhancing our work as educators of the future media practitioners who will come through our programs before entering and shaping these industries.