

Visible Conflicts and Vernacular Industry Studies

Alexander Russo, The Catholic University of America

I live in Washington, DC along a bus line that takes riders through the center of town and past various government office buildings, including The White House and the FCC. Among the buses I see are ones that are emblazed with the phrase “YOU HAVE LOST ACCESS TO THE WHITE HOUSE.” In a town where access is an especially valuable commodity, one might think that this was a novel political statement. It was something altogether different; a reference to Television Studies scholar favorite Walter White. His house, AMC, these bus ads inform us, is no longer being carried by Dish network. Dish dropped AMC because of ongoing carriage litigation. In the past several years, fights over carriage and retransmission have become both commonplace and public, with important implications for appeals to the viewers. Frequent messages in local newspapers, on websites, and on television exhort members of the viewing audience to side with one or another large corporate entity. These gambits within, and representations of, intra-industrial conflict make visible the policies, processes, and negotiations of that bring media content into our homes – in essence, distribution as a cultural practice.

Although scholars of the social history of media technology have a long history of examined the means by which media content is transmitted, distribution was not front and center in the everyday lives of people (even if could structure those lives in significant ways). We may vaguely aware that there is a complex system of circuits, wires, transmitters, and receivers that bring content from studio to home, but rarely do we consciously think about it. Distribution technologies have often receded into transparency, visibility only upon their failure. Distribution came to be thought of in binary terms, on or off, present or absent, but not as a malleable and contested process. But in line with recent calls to pay attention to the materiality of media, defining distribution as a set of social determined practices allows us to see the linkages between economic policies and viewers’ everyday lives.

Attempts by broadcasters and distributors to curry favor with viewers bring questions of public knowledge to the fore. They foreground the industrial production of television texts and the negotiations that structure how and when they are available to us. As John Ellis has argued, the last several decades have seen television move from an era of scarcity to an era of abundance. On-screen banners warning us of a channel's impending withdrawal undermine television's meta-textual promise that it is always there, always available. This impacts the affective relationship among viewer, medium, and text. Studies of fan efforts to save cancelled programs have demonstrated the profound emotional connections between audiences and shows they love. The brinksmanship of negotiations between distribution companies play on those desires and seek to reroute viewer anger over loss. Still, they are ultimately asking us to identify with one large corporation over another. Unlike the cult of Apple, no sleek products are on offer to serve as totems for devotion. Indeed, distribution companies are among the least well-liked companies in the country. Whether successful or not, their efforts reflect broader dynamics whereby fan practices have entered the mainstream and fans' affective energies have been harnessed to serve independent economic goals.

Likewise, regular warnings about channel loss have the potential to alienate audiences and remind them how profoundly interests outside their individual choice structurally determine their media pleasures. Channel loss could serve as a vehicle for consumer activism or a site for what Lisa Parks has called populist politics of infrastructure. The discourses about and the outreach involved in DTV transition taught us that television access is widely-regarded as a right, not a privilege. If CATV's origins were a response to the limits of 1940s television transmission, perhaps the future will yield another politics of distribution.