

Panel – Head in the Cloud: Rethinking Distribution in the Digital Age*Topic—Distribution Studies: Revisiting and Revising Conceptual Frameworks*

A cursory survey of the recent academic literature on media distribution might lead one to see little thematic consistency. Nonetheless, there are two points that those writing about distribution seem to agree: First, that scholars have examined distribution far less frequently than either production or consumption; and second, that the digital age has fueled dramatic changes in distribution processes and practices that necessitate greater interrogation. For this roundtable, I argue that while 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 many might suspect. In fact, the sense that there is a paucity of work 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 re-conceptualization 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 industries scholarship to imagine new ways of researching, teaching, and writing about the crucial “space in between” production and consumption.

A wide range of theoretical and methodological frameworks have been used to explore the various types of distribution activities. Film scholars employing a political economic approach (e.g., Philip Drake, Tom Schatz) have examined how a handful of major conglomerates have dominated the global media business through rights management and

exploitation. Television studies scholars coming from a cultural studies perspective (e.g., Tim Havens, Derek Kompare) have taken more of a “bottom-up” approach and considered the cultural dimensions of distribution decisions. Global media studies scholars (e.g., Michael Curtin, Jade Miller) have blended interviews, on-site visits, and analysis of select media texts to explore how local, regional, and global distribution networks are structured and how content flows through various regions. Meanwhile, media historians such as Caroline Frick and Haidee Wasson show how archives, libraries, and museums have long cultivated alternative distribution networks and also functioned as re-distributors.

As John Caldwell has noted in his exploration of production cultures, it is much easier to study labor and gain access to media production (writers’ rooms, sets, etc.) than it is to study management and gain entrée into corporate suites. Without doubt, issues of access have contributed to the directions taken in work on distribution. Yet 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 re-think the very meaning of the term “distribution,” potentially opening up new avenues of inquiry. This is the perspective taken by Ramon Lobato in *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 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, I propose three ways we might draw from and build on existing discourses of distribution:

- 1) **Employ a comparative approach** in which similarities and differences *across* media are explored further within individual research projects. Such studies might compare the logics governing the business strategies of particular corporate divisions; look at the discourses circulated by or about specific institutional agents; or examine how power is enacted in different physical spaces.
- 2) **Attend to the cultural** by building further on the “distribution from below” approach taken by scholars such as Lobato and Havens. What are the ideas or values that are “taken for granted” by those working in distribution? Issues that might be addressed include: how those working in the business draw distinctions between production and distribution or distribution and exhibition/retailing; whether such distinctions matter and to whom; and if a specific type of responsibility or power is seen as coming from self identifying as a distributor.
- 3) **Get physical**, meaning that we attend to the tangible technological infrastructures upon which digital distribution depends. Researchers might, for example, consider the various stakeholders’ struggles over physical infrastructures address the evolving distribution practices of technology companies (i.e., hardware producers).

Cumulatively, these frameworks should be seen as evidence of the richness of the scholarship already in progress and reinforce the value of integrating conversations currently occurring in several separate areas of media industry studies. My hope is that our panel can elaborate further on these frameworks and perhaps propose some additional ones as well.