Rethinking Distribution for the Future of Media Industry Studies

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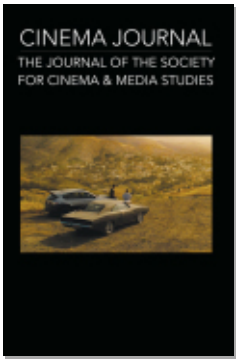

as their centers. Media industries want us obsessing about their idealized centers.[22] Yet they do not want us to think critically about their ubiquitous cultural interfaces.[23] And universities are now extensions of the creative industries, further clouding industries as clean targets for our research. Industrial research therefore requires examination of the complex 360-degree cultural interfaces and viral contact zones that media industries now carefully stage around us as we study them. ✻

22 Nick Couldry, *The Place of Media Power: Pilgrims and Witnesses of the Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2000).

23 Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 274–315.

Rethinking Distribution for the Future of Media Industry Studies

by Alisa Perren

A cursory survey of the recent academic literature on media distribution might lead one to see little thematic consistency. Nonetheless, there are two points about which those writing on distribution seem to agree: first, scholars have examined distribution far less frequently than either production or consumption; and second, the digital age has fueled dramatic changes in distribution processes and practices that necessitate greater interrogation.[1] In this essay, I argue that although 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 one might suspect. In fact, the sense that there is a paucity of literature 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 reconceptualization 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,

1 For examples of the first claim, see Toby Miller, Freya Schiwy, and Marta Hernández Salván, "Distribution, the Forgotten Element in Transnational Cinema," *Transnational Cinemas* 2, no. 2 (2011): 197–215; Timothy Havens and Amanda Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 163–164. For examples of the second claim, see Sven Jöckel, Andreas Will, and Florian Schwarzer, "Participatory Media Culture and Digital Online Distribution: Reconfiguring the Value Chain in the Computer Game Industry," *International Journal of Media Management* 10, no. 3 (2008): 102–111; Chuck Tryon, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

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 Industry Studies to imagine new ways of researching, teaching, and writing about the crucial "space in between" production and consumption.

What Do We Mean by "Distribution"? And How Has It Been Studied? Distribution companies have been labeled as "middlemen" and their employees as "intermediaries" responsible for ensuring that media find an audience. Yet distributors handle a large variety of different tasks. Overviews of the media industries typically identify the following as the primary emphases of distributors: assembling financing, procuring and/or licensing rights for projects for various platforms (e.g., iTunes, Netflix) or markets (e.g., Japanese theatrical, Latin American satellite television), managing the inflow and outflow of income from various corporate partners, designing release schedules and marketing strategies to establish and sustain audience awareness, and building and managing libraries.[2]

A wide range of theoretical and methodological frameworks have been used to explore these types of distribution activities. Film scholars employing a political-economic approach, such as Philip Drake and Thomas Schatz, have examined how a handful of major conglomerates have dominated the global media business through rights management and exploitation.[3] Their top-down examinations of corporate power and control employ trade and journalistic publications, along with corporate reports, as primary sources for research. Television Studies scholars coming from a cultural studies perspective, such as Timothy Havens and Derek Kompare, have taken more of a bottom-up approach, considering the cultural dimensions of distribution decisions. Havens attended trade shows and interviewed those involved in making acquisitions decisions; Kompare dug into archival sources and scoured research databases to learn how companies' distribution decisions shape our understanding of television history.[4] Global media studies scholars such as Michael Curtin, Jade Miller, and Juan Piñon have blended interviews, on-site visits, and analysis of selected media texts to explore how local, regional, and global distribution networks are structured and how content flows through various regions.[5]

2 For examples of overviews of what distributors do, see Havens and Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries*, 145–164; Janet Wasko, *How Hollywood Works* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 59–103; Jeffrey Ulin, *The Business of Media Distribution* (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2010).

3 Philip Drake, "Distribution and Marketing in Contemporary Hollywood," in *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*, ed. Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 63–82; Thomas Schatz, "New Hollywood, New Millennium," in *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*, ed. Warren Buckland (New York: Routledge, 2009), 19–46.

4 Timothy Havens, *Global Television Marketplace* (London: British Film Institute, 2006); Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation: How Repeats Invented American Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

5 Michael Curtin, *Playing to the World's Largest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Jade Miller, "Global Nollywood: The Nigerian Movie Industry and Alternative Global Networks in Production and Distribution," *Global Media and Communication* 8, no. 2 (2012): 117–133; Juan Piñon, "The Unexplored Challenges of Television Distribution: The Case of Azteca America," *Television & New Media* 12, no. 1 (2011): 66–90.

Meanwhile, media historians such as Caroline Frick, Jennifer Horne, and Haidee Wasson have shown how archives, libraries, and museums have long cultivated alternative distribution networks and functioned as redistributors.[6] These scholars depict the ongoing tensions that exist between professionals and practitioners who seek to preserve moving-image artifacts and those who wish to provide widespread access to those images to the public. Such studies are potent interventions in the era of convergence, effectively reinforcing that distribution can be conceived of as an activity taken on by those outside of major for-profit corporations. As one example, Frick's book *Saving Cinema* highlights how institutions (e.g., the Museum of Modern Art), government agencies (e.g., the Library of Congress), and international associations (e.g., the International Federation of Film Archives, UNESCO) have engaged with and participated in the business practices of corporations while also modeling alternative modes of distribution.

Across these areas, much of the recent discussion has been on the likely impact of new technologies on the circulation of content. Members of the industry and press have also chimed in regularly on this topic. For example, journalist Scott Kirsner and media executive Jordan Levin have spoken with optimism about the potential opportunities for outsiders to gain audiences and income as they bypass traditional distribution channels through disintermediation.[7] Much has also been said about how the major corporate players are adjusting their business models and rethinking the ways that content moves through space (flows) and time (windowing).[8] Certainly, this topic has been central to my own work; elsewhere I have considered the distinctive strategies employed by the film and television divisions of the major Hollywood conglomerates as they have struggled to navigate the contemporary media landscape and to "monetize" their content.[9] This approach is compelling not only because it is topical—it offers researchers the ability to see struggles and strategies "in progress"—but also because it is methodologically manageable.

As John Caldwell has noted in his exploration of production cultures, it is much easier to study labor and to gain access to media production (e.g., writers' rooms, sets) than it is to study management and gain entrée into corporate suites.[10] Without

6 Caroline Frick, *Saving Cinema: The Politics of Preservation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jennifer Horne, "A History Long Overdue: The Public Library and Motion Pictures," in *Useful Cinema*, ed. Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 149–177; Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

7 Scott Kirsner, *Fans, Friends & Followers* (CinemaTech Books, 2009); Jordan Levin, "An Industry Perspective: Calibrating the Velocity of Change," in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 256–263. For a more skeptical view of disintermediation, see David Lowery, "Meet the New Boss, Worse Than the Old Boss," *Trichordist* (blog), April 15, 2012, http://thetrichordist.wordpress.com/2012/04/15/meet-the-new-boss-worse-than-the-old-boss-full-post/.

8 For example, see Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Chuck Tryon, "Pushing the (Red) Envelope: Portable Video, Platform Mobility, and Pay-per-View Culture," in *Moving Data: The iPhone and the Future of Media*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 124–139.

9 For example, see Alisa Perren, "Business as Unusual: Conglomerate-Sized Challenges for Film and Television in the Digital Arena," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2010): 72–78.

10 John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

doubt, issues of access have contributed to the directions taken in work on distribution. Researchers often have had to rely primarily on public sources, such as newspapers, magazines, and trade publications; in so doing, they are forced to structure their work to account for industry discourse and spin. Many of these sources, unsurprisingly, have focused on the new and the now, namely the challenges new technologies pose to major companies' bottom lines. Even those who find creative ways to obtain access (see Jennifer Holt's contribution in this "In Focus") still struggle to get past the public relations arms of major companies and to secure detailed, accurate data. The research process does not get any easier for those studying non-Western distributors or smaller-scale operations; for example, those releasing Nollywood films often maintain records only informally.[11] Similarly, when smaller companies go out of business—a frequent occurrence in the independent realm—their records often go with them.[12]

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 rethink the very meaning of the term *distribution* and thus potentially open up new avenues of inquiry. This is the perspective taken by Ramon Lobato in his recently published book, *Shadow Economies of Cinema*.[13] 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."[14] Lobato provides case studies of alternative distribution networks—including the US straight-to-video market and 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, the remainder of this essay proposes three ways that we might draw from and build on existing discourses of distribution. Offered here are particular approaches that, though present in some recent scholarship, might be expanded on further. By no means should what follows be considered all-inclusive. Rather, the frameworks on offer should be viewed as evidence of the richness of the scholarship already in progress, thereby reinforcing the value of integrating conversations currently occurring in several separate areas of Media Industry Studies.

Toward a Comparative Approach. There is an interesting tension between the particular and the universal that is evident in much of the scholarship on distribution. In terms of "the particular," many scholars focus on issues pertaining to a specific medium and disciplinary formation. So, for example, in a recent collection, *Digital Disruption:*

11 Miller, "Global Nollywood."

12 Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2011), 27–29.

13 Ramon Lobato, *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

14 Ibid., 2.

Cinema Moves On-Line, several Film Studies scholars consider how Internet distribution is affecting the kinds of motion pictures that are produced and consumed.[15] Similarly, in *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Television Studies scholar Amanda Lotz considers how the meaning of "television" changes as distribution methods shift with the arrival of new technologies. In terms of "the universal," a handful of studies roam "across media," exploring the general impact of the digital on how, when, and where consumers access content, regardless of the medium in question.[16]

Although the former approach often provides greater nuance, it risks suggesting that the issues facing the particular medium (and being raised by that subdiscipline) are completely unique. The latter approach, meanwhile, illustrates larger patterns more effectively but is in danger of implying greater homogeneity and uniformity than actually exist across the media industries. What could be useful are more studies that provide comparative approaches across media.[17] Detailed case studies that compare the logics governing the business strategies of particular corporate divisions (e.g., the music and publishing divisions of one corporation), that look at the discourses circulated by or about specific institutional agents (e.g., the "digital distribution executive" in comic books versus gaming), or that examine how power is enacted in individual physical spaces (e.g., film versus television markets and trade shows) can help scholars to move beyond an attachment to media specificity in order to assess more clearly where differences and similarities exist. The often parallel-but-separate conversations taking place in different areas of research might diminish if more comparative approaches are initiated under the broader heading of "Distribution Studies."

Attending to the Cultural. Contributions by scholars such as Lobato and Havens show that a distribution-from-below approach has already gained traction in Media Industry Studies. Such work is valuable for taking us beyond examinations of the largest Western corporate players and biggest government funding bodies, calling attention to the contributions made by smaller-scale entities and less well-funded operations. These types of studies have explored how "commonsense" ideas about distribution have developed and been disseminated.[18] To build on this type of scholarship further, Caldwell's work in production studies might be translated more directly

15 Dina Iordanova and Stuart Cunningham, eds., *Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves On-Line* (St. Andrews, UK: St. Andrews Film Studies, 2012).

16 This approach tends to be favored by textbooks that provide broad overviews of the media industries. For example, see Havens and Lotz, *Understanding Media Industries*; David Croteau and William Hoynes, *The Business of Media: Corporate Media and the Public Interest* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2006). In *Cultural Industries* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 24, David Hesmondhalgh strikes an impressive balance between the universal and the particular. However, his book does not focus at length specifically on the subject of distribution. He opts to use the term *circulation* instead of *distribution*, with reproduction, distribution, and marketing all falling under this broader term.

17 For examples of comparisons between the gaming and film industries, see Robert Alan Brookey, *Hollywood Gamers: Digital Convergence in the Film and Video Game Industries* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Aphra Kerr and Roddy Flynn, "Revisiting Globalisation through the Movie and Digital Games Industries," *Convergence* 9, no. 1 (2003): 91–113.

18 Also see Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon, 1983); Richard Ohmann, Gage Averill, Michael Curtin, David Shumway, and Elizabeth Traube, eds., *Making and Selling Culture* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1996).

to the distribution sector of the media business. For example, Caldwell's taxonomy of industry texts and rituals—in which he charts the types of information that production workers disclose via intragroup, intergroup, and extragroup exchanges—could be reformulated.[19] For the purposes of studying distribution, it might instead be used to explore how those working in different sectors of the distribution business converse about issues such as brand management, piracy, and cloud computing.

Certain types of questions emerge for those wishing to construct taxonomies of distribution-related disclosures. For example: What does it mean to work in distribution? How does one draw distinctions between production and distribution or distribution and exhibition or retailing? Do such distinctions matter, and if so, to whom? Do industry workers tend to identify themselves as part of the distribution process? How often are such roles denied or elided? Does a specific type of responsibility or power come by self-identifying as a distributor?

Intellectual property attorneys, acquisitions executives, festival programmers, television schedulers, web technicians, and marketing assistants all could be identified as part of the distribution business. Importantly, distribution can be seen as taking place when "fan subbers" (i.e., amateur translators of movies and television series who operate outside sanctioned industrial channels) upload content to torrents, when truck drivers transport comic books from warehouses to retail stores, and when tablet devices are shipped from online retailers to individual residences. Determining the full range of intermediaries involved in distributive processes, and the types of influence they exercise over content individually or collectively, thus becomes a central research challenge.

Getting Physical. The industry's obsession with finding ways to profit from content through new online platforms has yielded a great deal of coverage in journalistic outlets and at industry gatherings. Yet even if discourses of the digital dominate media reports, it is important to remember that distribution is a physical practice. Recent work by scholars on technological infrastructures provides a potent reminder that distribution networks have environmental and personal effects. Scholars such as Lisa Parks and Nicole Starosielski, for example, have called attention to the struggles among communities, governments, and corporations over the placement of cell towers and underwater cables.[20] Such emphases make clear that, notwithstanding industry rhetoric about the decline of physical media (e.g., DVDs, CDs), distribution practices have substantive material consequences. In a related vein, Ethan Tussey illustrates that, although companies such as Netflix and Comcast may generate the lion's share of media attention for their streaming services, there are other industry and governmental stakeholders that affect the cost and quality of the media content (data) that we

19 Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 347.

20 Lisa Parks, "Around the Antenna Tree: The Politics of Infrastructural Visibility," *Flow*, March 5, 2010, http://flowtv.org/2010/03/flow-favorites-around-the-antenna-tree-the-politics-of-infrastructural-visibilitylisa-parks-uc-santa-barbara/; Nicole Starosielski, "'Warning: Do Not Dig': Negotiating the Visibility of Critical Infrastructures," *Journal of Visual Culture* 11, no. 1 (April 2012): 38–57.

consume over the Internet.[21] Tussey examines the important yet understudied impact of content development networks, such as Level 3, which contract with better-known brands such as Netflix. Level 3, he explains, hosts streaming media content on server farms and distributes this content to carriers such as Comcast and AT&T. These carriers, in turn, have threatened to increase their distribution fees, thereby violating net-neutrality principles and endangering the business models developed by companies such as Netflix (and, by extension, Level 3). Such discussions point to the political dimensions of distribution, dimensions that go beyond the standard discussions of conglomerate control and copyright ownership.

Much as studies of infrastructure can be integrated into a more expansive conceptualization of distribution, so, too, can a consideration of the distribution of hardware. Technology companies such as Sony and General Electric have disseminated devices and content for decades. However, newer technology companies like Apple, Google, and Amazon recently have entered into distribution in different ways. These companies are involved in transporting goods via mail, maintaining cloud storage systems, aggregating and promoting apps, and streaming third-party media content. The ways that such companies function as distributors of media—and the extent to which those activities intersect with their roles as retailer-exhibitors—merit further examination. As Jennifer Holt notes, the activities in which such companies engage not only complicate prior definitions of distribution but also pose new challenges for regulators.[22]

The Challenge Ahead: Circulating Our Ideas. This essay only begins to hint at the breadth and depth of scholarship on distribution. What can be seen from this cursory survey of the literature is that the perceived "shortage" of scholarship stems in part from a lack of certainty about what exactly constitutes distribution today, as well as from a lack of conversation across different areas of Media Studies. Much can be gained by using the label of "distribution" to categorize work on topics such as piracy, infrastructure, market research, trade shows, cloud security, and library building. There is also a pedagogical benefit to organizing this scholarship under the heading of "distribution." Whereas students often come into courses with a clear interest in learning about how media are made or consumed, the concept of distribution remains much murkier for them. Whether they seek to work in the media industry or to critique it, an understanding of distribution, in all its complexities, is vital. And as seductive as the rhetoric of disintermediation may be, it is a problematic discourse that needs to be explored and challenged far more extensively by both scholars and students of media distribution. ✻

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21 Ethan Tussey, "Things to Know about Streaming Infrastructure," *Media Industries Project*, December 1, 2011, http://www.carseywolf.ucsb.edu/mip/blog/things-know-about-streaming-media-infrastructure.

22 Jennifer Holt, "Platforms, Pipelines, and Politics: The iPhone and Regulatory Hangover," in Snickars and Vonderau, *Moving Data*, 140–154.