

Nailing Mercury

The Problem of Media Industry Historiography

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Terminology is important, but like mercury, it's slippery. The term "media industry" covers a huge slice of territory ranging over print, sound, screen, and digital bits in space, in venues as various as corporate communications, advertising, websites, novels, films, recordings, and music being shared person to person on the Internet. Its academic sites of study are just as various; media industry scholars can be found in departments of journalism, mass communications, film, English, art, theater, business, law, cultural studies, area and ethnic studies, music, anthropology, and many more. But, in the United States, the most extended and well-established body of work examining the function of the media industry in its most popular and widely disseminated forms has arisen around the "sound and screen" media: radio, television, and film, now extending to new digital venues such as the web, DVDs, and digital production.¹ This is a relatively new and indeterminate field marked more by what it excludes (or by what has been excluded) than by grounded inclusions. Typically it refers to those texts and practices that are *not* included in the study of literature, art, music, and drama as they have been structured in the academy over the last hundred years or so: namely, the Johnny-come-lately communicative arts, until recently tainted by an association with both machines and the masses, which by the humanities standards of an earlier time disqualified such pursuits as debased

and anti-individual, fodder for sociologists rather than critics or historians.²

Over the last half of the twentieth century, however, the admission of these technologically driven, industrially based, mass-produced expressive forms to the purviews of academic study has called into being a radically different conception of the entire process of creative production and reception. Scholarly study of media industries required a re-theorization of the task of the humanities scholar and a rethinking of the ways that we understand and analyze culture more generally in the postmodern world. A media industries focus points directly to those aspects of cultural production in the twentieth century and beyond that most trouble the humanities-oriented categories of coherence and analysis so central to our understanding of culture itself: the author, the text, the reader. These categories, exploded by Foucault and other postmodern theorists some 30 years ago, linger on in our modes of analysis even as we recognize their extreme fragility in the way that culture is produced and consumed. The media of radio, popular music, television, and film refuse to conform to comfortable analytical paradigms. They refute essentialization, require many components and participants, blur creative lines, stretch the boundaries of expressive forms, transgress aesthetic standards, cross over cultural borders, break down disciplined reception, muddy

meanings, pervade public and private spaces, and generally make a mess of our accepted ways of doing scholarship.

For historians – and all analysts are historians in some way or another – the media industries present particular problems. Where do we look for “authors” when authorship is dispersed among a host of productive sites (writers, directors, actors, technicians, marketers, advertisers, ratings companies, networks, studios, regulators, national boards and bodies, etc.) and how do existing (and non-existing) historiographical resources complicate this task? How do we approach “texts,” when we are confronted by, to take one extreme example, a program that originated in 1937 on daytime radio and still airs daily on television today, compiling such an incredibly voluminous text that no one person could ever possibly “read” it all in a single lifetime? (I refer, of course, to *The Guiding Light*, my candidate for the world’s oldest continuously running serial drama.) How do we understand “readership” when its permutations are so infinitely various and incalculable?

By taking an industries approach to the critical study of media we are indicating a perspective that is inherently contextual and interrelated. The concept of “industry” implies the coming together of a host of interests and efforts around the production of goods or services; it also indicates commercial purposes, meaning the distribution of goods or services in a marketplace for accumulation of profit, though this is sometimes more figurative than literal. In media studies, to nominate the industry as our focus of study indicates a concern for the creative forces of production behind the range of communicative texts and objects that comprise our field of analysis, a place held in more traditional humanistic studies by the author.

Thus industry study is the translation of authorship into a dispersed site marked by multiple, intersecting agendas and interests, where individual authorship in the traditional sense still most certainly takes place, but within a framework that robs it, to a greater or lesser degree, of its putative autonomy – a deeply disturbing displacement for many, and productive of much of the dystopian rhetoric that the concept of “mass media” has inspired over the course of two centuries. But it is also a vital enrichment of our understanding of cultural production

and a necessary corrective to the narrow categories of traditional scholarship.

In the following pages, I want to survey the field of media industry history, looking at various approaches through a lens that situates them within intellectual traditions forged in humanities scholarship. This will serve to indicate where the study of media production diverges from that comfortable scholarly habitus. I wish to link such approaches with the historiographic challenges they pose, from the location and preservation of sources to the complexity of historical narratives that they engender. In addition, I will examine the organizing frameworks these approaches bump up against and consider some key ways that scholars have organized their thinking on this complex subject: author, text, object, nation, quality. I hope this will provide media industry historians with a useful way of thinking through their task, as well as an overview of a rapidly developing field.

Industrial Production

De Certeau (1988) reminds us that histories always begin at the end: the writing of history cannot take place without a framework forged in and by the present, structuring our path into the past and determining the history that we will produce. In this case, my wish to begin with the most basic and taken-for-granted type of authorship, familiar to all, the humanistic author as individual creative figure – writer, director, producer, performer, designer, composer, etc. – actually represents a late-arriving and highly problematic construction for media studies, particularly television. It reflects the status that media industry studies is moving toward, not the direction from which it has come. Therefore I will leave consideration of the author for last, and begin the way that scholarship in this area itself did – with attempts to understand the arrival of the industrial site of creative production with its diffuse set of practices, “mass-produced” texts, and indeterminate audiences.

The site of production

The tradition of media industry analysis has its roots in the 1930s and 1940s. In film, early works like

Benjamin Hampton's (1931) *A History of the Movies*, Howard T. Lewis' (1933) *The Motion Picture Industry* and Mae Huettig's (1944) *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry* led to studies like Michael Conant's (1960) *Antitrust in the Motion Picture Industry* and Gertrude Jobs' (1966) *Motion Picture Empire*. All provided overviews of filmmakers and film studios as they analyzed the circumstances of production and the films thus produced. They laid the groundwork for a new type of scholarly analysis that began to emerge during the last few decades of the twentieth century, positioning itself on the uneasy terrain between economics-based business history and literary/critical analysis, and nominating the productive matrix itself as the site of study: studio, production company, recording label, station, and network.

In film, scholars such as Tino Balio, Janet Wasko, Thomas Schatz, Douglas Gomery, Richard B. Jewell, Anthony Slide, Garth Jowett, Robert Sklar, Richard M. Hurst, David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Janet Staiger combined economic analysis with a focus on the emergence of film as a new expressive medium. The burgeoning field of social, cultural, and aesthetic histories of American film that burst forth in the 1970s and 1980s built on these foundations.

Broadcasting history also depends on highly industry-oriented foundational texts with a production organization focus like Gleason Archer's two books, *A History of Radio to 1926* (1938) and *Big Business and Radio* (1939) and William Peck Banning's (1946) *Commercial Broadcasting Pioneer: The WEA Experiment*. Herman Hettinger filled in the role of the advertising agency in 1933 with his *A Decade of Radio Advertising* and Robert Landry (1946) gave an early overview in *This Fascinating Radio Business*. All of these studies were written either by authors employed in the broadcasting industry or with the industry's cooperation; they are unapologetically boosterish. They rely heavily on access to records provided or produced by industry corporations themselves.

In the late 1930s and 1940s media industries began to receive a more critical treatment as well. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, displaced from their German universities by the Nazis and largely

appalled by the mass-produced American culture they observed around them, took up a critique of the "cultural industries" that combined an awareness of the power of this new type of cultural production with an intellectual disdain for their products and an anxious concern for their cultural and political effects.³ Llewellyn White's study *The American Radio*, written for the Committee on Freedom of the Press in 1947, along with the work of Charles A. Siepmann in the 1940s and 1950s (highly influential in the early years of broadcasting's admission into the academy), provide a similarly critical take on industrial history and posit a reform agenda. Historians of the broadcasting industry have made fruitful critical use of these sources and of the corporate archives and trade journals upon which they drew for source material. These early works set the stage for broadcasting scholarship to come: focused firmly on industrial questions, almost to the exclusion of the aesthetic or cultural, in contrast to film; and torn between a perspective that glorified the business of broadcasting and one that regarded it as deficient, backward, and sadly lacking in social and cultural substance.⁴

Our single most substantive history of the US broadcasting industry – and it is primarily an industrial account, though with much to interest the social historian – remains Erik Barnouw's three-volume sequence, *The History of Broadcasting in the United States*. Barnouw's task was formidable. Though a few prescient broadcasters had donated their papers to various archives, and one network, NBC, had begun to send its early papers to the Wisconsin Historical Society,⁵ Barnouw's major sources consisted of his contacts within the industry along with the trade press and the oral histories of the Broadcast Pioneers project, to which he added considerably as he proceeded.⁶ The major networks provide a fair amount of structure across Barnouw's three volumes, but he also visits the more powerful stations scattered across the country, the meeting rooms of advertising agencies, the halls of regulators, the production lots of Hollywood, the propaganda centers of the USIA, and moves outward, into society at large: its political centers, courtrooms, sporting events, battlefields, living rooms, and every other place where radio and television made their

presence felt. His cannot be considered an industry history in the sense of concentrating on structures and economics, but it is a work that includes a backbone of economic, structural, and regulatory considerations. As an account that looks about more broadly, it speaks to the concerns of media industry historians, and indeed still serves as one of our most valuable sources.

Barnouw's history stood nearly alone until the arrival of Christopher Sterling and John M. Kittross' groundbreaking textbook, *Stay Tuned: A Concise History of American Broadcasting* in 1978. Here a policy-centered approach dominates, though the industry is well accounted for and textual development traced as well. The importance of public policy to broadcasting industry historiography – as agent, as subject, and as active producer of source materials – is a factor that frequently distinguishes this area of media analysis from others. This is not to imply that state intervention has not played a role in the development of the media generally: intellectual property law, First Amendment protections, and antitrust statutes all enter centrally into industry concerns across media. Yet the policy perspective is one that has run centrally through broadcast historiography and scholarship, for reasons traced below in the consideration of the structuring paradigm of “nation.” Broadcasting – more than any other medium – has been the chosen medium of the nation-state around the world, a fact reflected in academic analysis but rarely foregrounded or theorized.

Aside from these key texts, and though many popular accounts of the radio and TV industries sprang up over the decades of the twentieth century, academic attention to the production matrix remained scattered. Until the early 1990s this was a field dominated by a critical sociological approach, perhaps best exemplified by Todd Gitlin's (1983) oft-cited *Inside Prime Time*. With the appearance of works such as Susan Douglas' (1987) *Inventing American Broadcasting*, William Boddy's (1990) *Fifties Television*, Tino Balio's (1990) edited volume *Hollywood in the Age of Television*, my own *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable* (1990), and Christopher Anderson's (1994) *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties*, non-film media industry studies entered scholarly publishing and teaching.

There are major gaps; though Hollywood studios have dominated television ever since the 1960s, very rarely have they been treated as important sites of creative production specifically for television, as opposed to film. Independent television production companies have been neglected equally; studies on MTM (Feuer et al. 1984), Ziv (Rouse 1976), and Desilu (Schatz 1990) are either essay-length or unpublished.

During the formative decades of American broadcasting, as genres were invented, basic structures set in place, and the industry's cultural role extended throughout the world, the main innovation in programming took place in the offices of advertising agencies. Despite this fact, not a single book-length scholarly work has focused on the role of the advertising agency.⁷ Television's historical roots in radio are frequently ignored, though over the last 20 years the study of radio and sound media also has experienced a revival. Though constantly nominated in popular frameworks as central organizing institutions, the major American networks still await the kind of comprehensive account Asa Briggs has given the BBC. Recent work has taken on the important but somewhat less daunting task of limning the operations of newer or shorter-lived networks like DuMont (Weinstein 2004), Fox (Zook 1999; Perren 2004), and the WB and UPN (Cole 2005); I served as editor of a compilation of historical essays on the history of America's first and oldest network, NBC, which takes a step in the direction of a network history but hardly can scratch the surface of such a huge and multifaceted social/industrial institution (Hilmes 2007).

Aside from a flourishing field of biographies and autobiographies of the networks' leading figures, there is much here that begs to be explored by the next generation of media industry historians.⁸ Further, there are many ancillary industries that form a part of the media industry productive matrix: ratings and market research companies, the trade press, awards organizations, professional associations, craft unions, Congress, and the multitude of social and political organizations that have made the media part of their operations. These include political parties, parents and teachers groups, lobbyists, athletic associations, and religious organizations,

just to name a few, and their operations have been affected by their convergence with the media industries just as much as the media themselves. These convergences and connections require far more attention than they have been given, despite the few excellent groundbreaking texts thankfully available.⁹

Texts and genres

Another route into an examination of the media industries is through a focus on the text. This focus need not be the type of purely aesthetic textual exegesis inherited from literary studies, but rather can place the text within a productive context and analyze the forces – both immediate and distant – that work upon it to produce its genesis, development, specifications, narrative structures and trajectories, audience formations and readings, etc. The text-based approach provides critical and historical advantages similar to those of the individual author, but just as equally marked by problems. It nominates an accepted and understandable category of cultural creativity, implying and building on a unity of form that is capable of holding up even where authorship falls apart. The putative unity of the stand-alone text is reflected in the ways that historical information is categorized and indexed, in sources ranging from the popular and trade press to library catalogs, archive finding aids, and web-based sites. It also reflects a dominant way that audiences experience sound and screen media.

The text-centered approach to media industry study is far better suited to film studies, with the nomination of the theatrical film as its primary object (despite the violence thus done to the many types of material actually produced on film; see the discussion of this strategy below), than to the fields designated as radio, television, and popular music studies. Yet, even for television, no matter how broken up, extended, changed, spun off, and re-venued most texts are, a presumed core remains. This can be seen especially in long-running shows, such as *Law and Order* or *ER*, where a completely different cast may pursue completely different storylines written and produced by completely different authors as the show ages, and is aired on a different network or seen on DVD. In spite of this,

certain key elements – the setting, the basic dramatic situation, familiar themes and motifs – provide continuity and a form of unity. A different set of problems exists for popular music studies, where the distinction between text and performance has always comprised a central concern.

For television and to a lesser extent for film, text-based industry analysis has usually taken place within the framework of genre, by which genre is understood as a site in which industry-shaped expectations and needs intersect with dramatic forms to produce variations on familiar tropes, themes, narratives, and characterizations (see, for instance, Mittell 2004). Genre has sometimes been discussed as a kind of mass-produced shortcut to cultural innovation, allowing slightly differentiated texts to be stamped out on the assembly line of the television series or serial: what Gitlin (1983) refers to as “recombinant” texts that simply combine pre-approved elements into a modified but highly predictable product. The fact that most artistic and cultural creation takes place through a similar process – artists, composers, and writers learning from the traditions and cultural production around them, recombining elements into a novel form – often drops out of sight when the subject at hand is media texts, imposing the anti-popular assumptions of the Frankfurt School critique onto popular television, film, and music composition without considering the unique challenges and creative possibilities that the media industry setting also provides.

Recently some defenses of the new “quality” dramas on television – sparked by the successes of pay cable channels like HBO – have defined some specifically televisual characteristics available to TV texts such as intimacy of characterization, everydayness, and narrative depth developed over the *long-durée* that few other media can achieve. Yet the vast bulk of the texts that actually appear on television fit least comfortably of all media within humanities-based generic expectations, encompassing as they do forms not easily associated with traditional literary exegesis: news, advertising, makeover and reality shows, documentary, discussion, performances of various types, and so on. I will discuss the structuring paradigm of “object” further (e.g., filmic object, televisual object) in the last section of this chapter;

the problematics of “object” run through the analysis of both film and broadcasting texts, and indeed frame the distinctions made between them.

The individual author

As noted above, one quality of industrial production is the obscuring of the contributions of the individual behind a scrim of group effort and the patterns of mass production. Authorship becomes dispersed, parceled out, and dependent on a number of factors normally simply excluded from view by traditional humanities approaches (necessitating an ancillary industry of digging them out again: the role of the muse, the wife, the editor, the school, the publisher, the patron, etc.). The “individual author approach” has many advantages, following recognizable and well-worn paths of understanding creative production – still valid and important, even within a wider industries approach – and all of the historiographical conveniences that come with that: a limited field of focus, an automatic periodicity, a bounded narrative, and a congruence with the way that source materials tend to be produced (e.g., collected papers of individuals in archives, search terms in indexes, biographical works, journalistic coverage, etc.).

This approach has been more successful in some areas of media industry study than others; it has been slow to arrive in the field more generally precisely because of the ways that media scholarship cuts against the grain of accepted academic practices and categories. Film scholarship attained a position in the humanities largely through its nomination of the director as cinematic *auteur* in the 1960s, thanks to the efforts of French *nouvelle vague* critics such as André Bazin and François Truffaut, translated into the American context by, most notably, Andrew Sarris, and then put into effect by the first generation of academic film scholars and programs. The body of work that began to appear in the late 1960s and 1970s on “pantheon” directors such as D. W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, Sergei Eisenstein, Fritz Lang, Frank Capra, Ernst Lubitsch, Orson Welles, and many more helped put film study on the map – even as it ex-nominated much that actually made up the field of film production. Biographies and autobiographies of significant

creative figures, particularly the Hollywood star, add to this body of production. Though the focus might be on the individual artist, inevitably he or she is situated within an industrial structure, either happily complicit or in stormy opposition. However, as noted above, in some ways the nomination of the individual *auteur* figure works against the complexity and interdependence of a media industries approach, and thus efforts to isolate the contributions of a particular figure must always fundamentally distort the realities of media authorship; the best and most useful works foreground that relationship and bring the struggle into productive analysis.¹⁰

It is telling that for television the move toward *auteurship* has proven more difficult, since the typical television text has multiple sources of creative input, from networks and production companies to producers, writers, directors, performers, and their agents. Only recently has the writer–producer found some purchase as the putative author in television production; the television director remains, it seems, negligible as a contributor to the form, and only a very few studies exist of the television writer (see Wicking & Vahimagi 1979; Heil 2002). Scholarly analyses of television writer–producers as individual creative artists are few in number; surely more than Fred Coe (Krampner 1997), Fred Allen (Havig 1990), Norman Corwin (Bannerman 1986), and Nat Hiken (Everitt 2000) are key US broadcasting auteurs deserving of book-length studies. A few overviews have appeared; again, they are notable in their scarcity. These include Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley’s *The Producer’s Medium* in 1983, and a recent corrective to that book, *Women Television Producers, 1948–2000* by Robert Alley and Irby Brown in 2001. David Marc and Robert J. Thompson (1992) joined in with their book *Prime Time, Prime Movers* and Thompson with Gary Burns (1990) in a thought-provoking collection of essays, *Making Television: Authorship and the Production Process*. It could be that only now is television opening up to a new form of writer–producer *auteurship* that is better known in other countries than in the US, with creative producers able to build and sell programs across a variety of platforms that rely upon their authorial “brand” to distinguish their productions, much as literary authorship has always functioned.¹¹ David

Chase, Dick Wolf, Aaron Spelling, and Steven Bochco, to name a few, have built careers that have transcended individual programs, production companies, and networks in a way that few producers in previous decades could, but all await in-depth critical analyses of the kind extended to film auteurs routinely. However, it is the sign of a field still in development that some of our most productive and innovative writer-producers have not yet been the subjects of full-length critical studies: Irna Phillips, Arch Oboler, Jack Benny, Carlton Morse, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, Rod Serling, Norman Lear, and Grant Tinker, to name a few.

Structuring Paradigms

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Important tensions within this field remain to be explored, and until we think them through, media industry studies will remain a divided and contradictory area of research, unable to cope with the challenges that face it in the twenty-first century. I have referred in the pages above to three such determinate frameworks, which always have worked behind our basic assumptions and understandings of what media are and where we should look to examine them: the structuring paradigms of object, nation, and quality.¹² These terms refer to the problem of, first, defining the object of study in a way that avoids the pitfalls of older paradigms and enables fruitful study in an era of converging media forms and industries; second, acknowledging the important role that media have played in the twentieth-century preoccupation with nation-building and that nation-states have played in the development of media; and third, recognizing the shift from a restricted, elitist, and indeed nationalistic view of quality and cultural value to more open, populist, and globally democratic perspectives. As we move away from the old era of analog media and into the digital age and beyond, the basic organizing paradigms of an earlier time need to be acknowledged and critiqued so that we can proceed.

The object

First, what is the media object? The lines that scholars have drawn between various media have been blurred

since the beginning, as industry practices clearly show but academics have ignored or even resisted. Take the field best established in the academy and most clear about its object of study: how can we defend the paradigmatic object of “film” study – the stand-alone theatrical film – when it represents a prominent but small subset of works actually produced on film and seen on screens? Most television programs (to name just one excluded area) have been shot on film since the 1960s, and more films are viewed on television sets than in theaters, via cable, video-on-demand, videocassettes, or DVD. Television, as referenced above, has never been as clearly demarcated in form or technology, yet its boundaries grow ever looser: how do we define the parameters of “television,” when an increasing segment of the population receives its “television” programs online and views them on a computer, iPod, or cell phone screen? How do we separate the study of radio broadcasting from the study of recorded music, since that has been its primary content since the 1950s? It is a key characteristic of media studies – and, by extension, media industry studies, that the field has been broken up into segments nominated by technology as separate (film, radio, television, video, recordings, DVDs, etc.) even as texts, production, and reception circumstances inevitably violate all such arbitrary divisions. Convergence is not a new phenomenon; it is the very hallmark of modern media.

Clearly, these objects we have designated as technologically determined separate spheres always have converged, and in fact it is academic paradigms that have kept them separate far longer than any logics of production or industrial framework could justify. Further, the separation of these forms of mediated expression from their counterparts in “non-industrialized” spheres such as literature, drama, performance, and documentary remains arbitrary in the extreme, the product more of hierarchical value structures than any inherent or logical distinction. This has been obvious at the level of industrial production for over half a century, as movie studios became radio and then television producers, expanded into recorded music, vied with television and cable networks in film and music production, and now intersect with the fields of new media and new modes of convergence (Jenkins 2006).¹³

The advent of digital technology just has begun to shake apart the structures and distinctions with which we have become comfortable, requiring a rethinking of our approach to the object of study as well as our historiographic methods. As certain forms of source material swirl past us in abundance on the web, archives are digitized, and access to documents and industry information appears to be greater than ever, preservation of traditional forms of text – memos, letters, reports, scripts – ceases and in fact can become even scarcer in the age of instant duplication and fears of lawsuits. Preserving traces of our digital past is a task that archivists and historians are only now beginning to grapple with, a far more complex topic than can be discussed here. As such, a constant interrogation of our categories of analytical object must be a part of media study in the twenty-first century. In their useful 2002 essay, Anderson and Curtin point to the strangely contradictory nature of television as an object of historical study, combining scarcity with overabundance. Certain kinds of historical evidence remain very scarce, especially those having to do with audiences and reception, less celebrated types of texts, and details of the production process simply unavailable to the outside scholar. Yet, at the same time, television's overabundant production, its endless series, 24-hour schedules, and multiple channels provide a landscape that is simply too large and complicated to be taken in properly, and that resists the type of limiting operation necessary to scholarship: canons, hierarchies, careful archiving and inventorying, etc. This contradiction marks digital media as well, with its overabundance of information available at the end of a Google search about almost anything at all, while everyday crucial documentation disappears, swept into the maw of constant digital renewal and demolition.

The nation

The twentieth century, which saw the development of the sound and screen media, also goes down in history as a century of struggle over the idea of the nation. Hobsbawm (1992) calls the years between 1917 and 1950 “the apogee of nationalism,” as colonized nations struggled for independence and two

world wars redrew national boundaries; the forces of globalization so prevalent since the 1950s worked to highlight the role of the nation-state in both spreading and resisting globalizing forces. The task of construction and preservation of national cultures and identities became centrally bound up in the work of media, which came under the direct supervision of the nation-state at many crucial junctures, particularly during times of war – hot or cold. Even more than film, broadcasting appealed to governments throughout the world as a natural venue for both state control over a powerful domestic means of communication and an outward agent of information and propaganda. As a result, broadcasting was regulated, supervised, policed, and, in many cases, monopolized by the state to a greater degree than other forms of modern communication. Reaching more powerfully into the private sphere than any other medium, radio and television became command central for the public project of nationalism and national identity formation. In many nations this occurred in response to the seemingly unstoppable flood of cultural products from the United States, particularly Hollywood film; national public service broadcasting became the site of resistance to cultural denationalization in most nations around the world, imposing quotas on foreign programs, providing support for domestic production, regulating and restricting content, and transmitting the symbols, rites, and rituals of national culture both inward and outward. Even in the United States, where private ownership and a looser regulatory structure reigned, broadcasting received a greater degree of state guidance and concern than any other medium, out of very similar concerns over national identity and cultural unity. In film, national cinemas defined themselves around a model of auteur-driven noncommercial “quality” production in contradistinction to the threat of Hollywood.

Another familiar dichotomy emerges: while media industries have consistently seen their markets as both global and national, and while globalization – like convergence – continuously plays a role in the history of media production, scholarship has tended to reflect the agenda of the nation-state and focus unreflectively on the national as the primary sphere of production. The majority of analyses have

chosen to concentrate (as has this one), without much in the way of theorization, on activities defined within national boundaries, screening out those traces of transnational activity and influence that are plainly there. This is not to say that the national framework does not deserve attention – obviously, it is key – but that it must be understood not as essential and pre-existing but as constructed within the context of media industry transnationalism that in fact helped to inspire it. Flows of capital, of creative personnel, of program forms, of creative concepts, and of cultural experience, from nation to nation and across the globe, are as much a part of any mediated expression as its national roots, and this factor needs to be recognized and included in historical analyses. Resistance and opposition are strong forms of transnational influence as well.

To give one small example, the soap opera, a culturally denigrated form associated with both a passive/addicted female audience and an over-close relationship with the economic imperatives of US commercial broadcasting, has a history that goes far beyond this simple genealogy. Though serialized dramas produced by and for women may have first emerged on American daytime radio in the early 1930s, by the middle of that decade American scripts were being adapted into other national languages and cultures, performed live over the air in Canada, Australia, Cuba, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and many other venues – an early example of “format” production. In Quebec, French-language versions of the soaps heard on the Montreal CBS affiliate found wider audiences on local stations, and developed eventually into the well-established Québécois tradition of the *radio-feuilleton*, the radio serial, with its own native writers and celebrated texts. So popular were the *radio-feuilletons* that the Canadian government used them as World War II broke out as venues for morale-building and propaganda – even as concerns over “Americanization” of culture kept such programs off the English-language CBC and made them anathema at the BBC as well. A Canadian producer, Ernest Bushnell, drew on this example while seconded to the BBC. He suggested a similar propaganda vehicle for the BBC North American Service, thus originating *Front Line Family*, Britain’s first serial radio drama. Cuban broadcasters performed

a similar act of translation and adaptation in the 1930s and 1940s, producing Spanish-language *radio-novelas* which were broadcast all over Central and South America and the Caribbean, leading to the thriving telenovela industry of today. In Britain, however, the association of serialized drama with American commercialism remained so strong that, despite the popular success of early radio soaps like *The Archers* (begun in 1949 and still on the air today) and ITV’s popular *Coronation Street*, it would take until 1985 for the BBC to embrace the form with *EastEnders* (Hendy 2003). This is a tale of transnational influences and resistances that crucially defined broadcasting in a way that both reflects and defies media’s national function.

Quality

As can be seen in the transnational history of the serial, the close relationship between the nation and modern sound and screen media is deeply imbricated in the place assigned them within hierarchies of cultural quality. The association of such media with technologized production and a state-driven or market-based reach toward the uneducated masses, as noted above, placed film, broadcasting, and popular music in a sphere outside the more respectable arts. Yet the project of constructing the modern nation-state mandated direct public intervention in the production of such mass-directed culture, far more than for those media elevated by the requirement for literacy or specialized appreciation into the purview of the educated elite. Therefore considerations of quality became the consistent focus of public policy and debate as successive new media emerged. Among the questions that have occupied intellectuals and regulators over the nation-building decades of the twentieth century are: how can we direct media production in certain ways and discourage it in others? How can we best inculcate national cultural unity and fend off disruptive forces? Concepts of “quality” in national media formed around resistance to the denationalizing and “homogenizing” influence of transnational popular culture, usually from “Hollywood.”

Governments formed commissions, instituted regulatory bodies, and imposed rewards and penalties

on cultural production in a systematic fashion never before possible, or considered necessary. Modern sound and screen media were perceived as vitally necessary to address and recruit into the national public sphere those audiences and elements that challenged it, particularly the subnational (local and regional identities in tension with the national), the pre-national (those social groups seen as requiring particular assistance in being integrated into the model of national citizenship, such as women, children and youth, the working class, and ethnic, religious, and racial minorities), and the transnational (influences seen as “foreign” and denationalizing).

Yet this “downwards address” also placed media industry production on the degraded level of the popular; its violation of the norms of humanistic authorship and textual unity made it unsuitable for academic analysis and respectability. The “highbrow/lowbrow” split that Levine (1988) traces began as the first mass-produced media emerged – in print and photography, later in film, recorded music, and radio – all of them challenging the distinctions and unities of the newly elevated arts and setting a value on widespread accessibility over educated discernment. Indeed, the elevation of high culture necessitated the debasement of popular forms; the denigration of mass media enabled the elevation of the elite arts by contrast and opposition. Only in

the latest decades of the twentieth century, as globalization began to break down carefully nurtured nationalized categories of quality and hierarchies of value, has the democratization of culture begun to bring media into focus in scholarly analysis, in a broader movement to recontextualize and complicate the study of cultural forms and their relationship to the societies that produce them. In particular, the connection between market forces and cultural production has emerged onto the central stage; as global capital drives cultural recombination, boundaries of object, nation, and quality become destabilized, and new approaches to cultural analysis become imperative.

Thus to propose the serious study of media industries is a bold and iconoclastic task, but a necessary one, calling into question some of the dominant analytical frameworks that have shaped not only media scholarship but notions central to humanistic study generally. Now a second generation of media scholars has crossed that Rubicon; this text and the many recent books appearing in this flourishing field mark its increasing legitimacy. Humanities scholarship of the future should and, I believe, will include media industry analysis at its heart. Mercury is, after all, the messenger, the symbol of human communication; as a substance it is difficult to pin down but very good at escaping from arbitrary restraints.

Notes

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- 1 “Media studies” also tends not to include print media such as newspapers and magazines, which have their own history of marginalized inclusion in higher education. Confined to departments of journalism dating back to the first decades of the last century, they struggle still today with the status of “applied knowledge” or “professional training” that has isolated them from mainstream humanities research.
 - 2 See Strinati (2000) for a discussion of the history of “mass” culture.
 - 3 There is a longer tradition of social science-based media critique going back to the Chicago school of sociology and running through the Payne Fund studies to the work of Paul Lazarsfeld and other influential intellectuals like Rudolph Arnheim and Herta Herzog. See Czitrom (1983) for an account of its effects on media scholarship.
 - 4 It should be noted that the late 1970s and 1980s saw the appearance of a variety of essential textbooks, reference works, and other kinds of factual summaries on the broadcasting industry without which subsequent scholarship would have been severely impoverished. See Compaine (1979); Buxton & Owen (1972); Dunning (1976); and Castleman & Podrazik (1982; 1984).
 - 5 Later, it would donate other materials to the Library of Congress; NBC remains the only major network to preserve its historical records in this way.
 - 6 For more on Barnouw, see Hilmes (2004) and Hilmes & VanCour (2007).
 - 7 Two analyses of the agency role exist in dissertation form (Mashon 1996; Meyers 2005).
 - 8 Though I have nominated popular music as another key media field that cannot be truly separated from

- film and television, only recently have media scholars such as myself begun to engage with music history and industry studies, and music historians with media history. Similarly, the print media have been separated from “sound and screen” media far more adamantly in academic study than in real-world conditions. We need far more histories that cross these arbitrary boundaries and focus on the many links and cross-influences between media.
- 9 See Godfried (1997); Hendershot (1998); Swanson (2000); Hangen (2002); and Meehan (2005).
 - 10 See Bignell and O’Day (2004) for an excellent example of a contextualized analysis of one writer’s work and by extension what it means to nominate such a figure as an auteur.
 - 11 Both Palgrave Press and Syracuse University Press have series based on the television author premise.
 - 12 These are by no means the only important structuring frameworks that affect media study; I have not attempted to talk about those surrounding texts and audience reception. I single these out as particularly important in the way that media industry studies have been understood academically with an admitted bias toward the course my own work has taken.
 - 13 It should be noted that dominant academic emphasis has also neglected film, television, and sound productions that fall outside the dominant industry designation: home movies and videos, amateur productions, industrial and educational films and broadcasts, fan productions, etc. A few scholars are now attempting to redress that oversight; see the Orphan Film Festival website, www.sc.edu/filmsymposium, the Prelinger film archive, www.archive.org/details/prelinger, as well as Becker (2007). Websites accessed June 30, 2007.

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