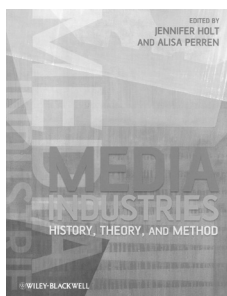


Stephanie M. Hoover

## Book Review: Jennifer Holt & Alisa Perren (eds), *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*

Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009

\$42.00 (paperback)



The provocative question which opens Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren's anthology *Media Studies* asks: "Does the World Really Need One More Field of Study?" The study of media has seen its fair share of methodologies and approaches that proceed, by turns, through a cycle of popularity and senescence. More than simply adding yet another 'field of study' Holt and Perren's compilation is a synthetic act which strives to bring together the most generative strategies of previous frameworks and combine them with new approaches that will not only account for today's shifting media environment, but do so with greater depth and comprehensiveness.

The editors introduce the work by explaining the need to establish the 'Media Industries' as a unique field of academic inquiry. In doing so, they trace the intellectual roots of the study of media which they describe as a combination of humanistic and social science approaches. These various approaches have remained dispersed and partial in their application - this is what motivates their attempt to unite them as a single field. In addition, altered relationships between users and producers as well as evolving distributional modes require more nuanced approaches to understanding texts.

The authors examine each prior influential mode of analysis beginning with the rise of the mass media and the work of the Frankfurt School during the World War II era. This particular school of thought is "anathema" to the media industries approach due to its "elitist bias," its depiction of the audience as powerless receivers of a "one-way flow of communication," as well as its conception of the media industry as a monolith. Their critique of Adorno and Horkheimer, in particular, reveals one of the overarching themes that runs throughout the work - namely that Holt and Perren, as well as the other authors in the collection, fundamentally believe in an active, engaged and powerful audience.

The anthology is organized into four areas: History, Theory, Methodologies and Models, and The Future: Four Visions. Each area "is an open conceptual discussion about the many ways that media industry research has been undertaken in the past and what interdisciplinary models, methods, and visions it might embrace in the future." [1] Michele Hilmes' opening essay characterizes the study of media industries as "mercurial" in order to express the fact that such study needs to "escape from its arbitrary restraints." She convincingly argues that our modes of analysis are outdated and

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are often supported by concepts that have long been critiqued.

Other work in the History area includes Caroline Frick's piece which examines how issues of the moving image archive pertain to an expanded study of media industries. Her article advocates for an understanding of the moving image archive as part of the industry itself rather than a separate area. Thomas Schatz's work also helps to ground the field historically by examining the evolution of postwar Hollywood in terms of mode of production, authorship and film style. The remaining articles in the section examine the commonalities between early media and its contemporary transformation as well as to parse out what is specifically 'new' about new media's 'modes of interactivity.'

The second section of the book outlines several potential theoretical approaches to the field. Although the book begins with a wide-ranging critique of the Frankfurt School as well as pointing out the shortcomings of the Birmingham School, Douglas Kellner's essay seeks to recuperate those elements of these two schools which might be generative for Media Industries Studies if they were updated. The essential element he seeks to retain is the ability of various media to influence ideology as well as the emphasis on power as being a crucial lens for the examination of the media.

Other work in this area includes Nitin Govil's article which examines the role of the nation in structuring how media industries are thought about and produced. Govil argues that "scale, subsidy, and subjectivity" are all ways "through which the media industries think nationally." [2] Govil's essay concludes a series of three articles which think critically about the strata of globalized media: the global, the national and the regional. This series reigns in some of the hyperbolic discourse surrounding new media's spatial and temporal transformations by reasserting the relevance of familiar terms and structures, albeit in modified forms, as well as through the use of Media Industries' combinatory approaches.

The following section explores particular methods and models which might be useful in establishing the field. Philip Napoli's essay on media economics addresses specific attributes of the media industries which complicate strict economic

analysis. He identifies two main products of media: content and audiences, yet even these prove incommensurable. While content can be recycled ad infinitum at different prices due to "windowing," media audiences are ephemeral lasting only through the moments of consumption. From John McMurria's chapter on the role of regulation and law to John T. Caldwell's desire to expand media industries studies to include photography, this area of the collection appears to be pulled in too many directions. Each essay applies several aspects of the approach without describing how to put the varying methods in conversation – instead offering particular instances of its application. While such demonstrations offer insight they are less useful helping to establish Media Industries as praxis.

The book's final section looks to the future. The four essays included here all reiterate Holt and Perren's conception of the audience as active and empowered while being cognizant of the realities of media production and economic imperatives that can often work against the progressive nature of recent shifts within the media industries. Much of the time is spent casting off demons of negativity such as the so-called "Schiller-McChesney version of political economy." [3] The section includes an essay from industry insider Jordan Levin which rehashes much of what has already been discussed in earlier sections regarding the radical transformation of the media industries in recent years. The section and the book conclude with Horace Newcomb's essay "Toward Synthetic Media Industry Research." Newcomb's article succinctly encapsulates what the rest of the book has laid the groundwork for: that the study of media industries would be greatly enhanced by expanding the terms of analysis and then putting the derived knowledge in conversation. By ridding scholarly perceptions of the industry as monolithic, new understandings of exactly who is a producer and who the media belongs to can become more nuanced and reflective of current practices. Newcomb further notes that along with more inclusive analysis, such study also needs to become more specific: generalizations work against understanding how industries function and prevent the mobilization of that knowledge to more generative ends.

By modeling its approach on the multiple and transitory nature of the media industries it studies, this collection clarifies the need for a new approach. A key strength of this book is its attention to the specific scholarly histories which have shaped knowledge production on the media industries to date. Given this, it would be an asset in introductory graduate level courses or for upper level undergraduates if the students have already been exposed to the foundational methods. Although it is evident that this approach is still in nascent form, the ability of such an approach to explore and comprehend the forces which shape and constrain media industries should prove useful for scholars in their attempt to keep scholarship apace with its critical object.

Having acknowledged the potential uses of such an inclusive approach, at the book's conclusion the specificity of the contributing methodologies still appear quite prominent. Moreover, as evidenced

by the above discussion of these articles' main points, there appears to be some degree of difficulty in determining how to unify so many disparate approaches - an issue that seems to be both an asset and a weakness. On one hand, such openness makes this scholarly lens infinitely malleable, responsive to the needs of multiple projects, yet, at the same time selecting only certain elements from the vast array tugs at the field's coherence - putting into question the need for a unique methodological distinction. As case in point, two months after its publication, Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell released a collection, *Production Studies*, which attempts to demonstrate the usefulness of a Media Industries approach in understanding media production. While the text gives new insight into previously under-examined aspects of production, the text is itself a marker of the continuing need to prove the relevance of the Media Industries method as a unique field of inquiry.

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#### End Notes

[1] Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, eds., *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 2.

[2] *Ibid*, 133.

[3] *Ibid*, 230.

2 David Hesmondhalgh, "Media Industry Studies, Media Production Studies," in *Media and Society*, ed. James Curran (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), 147. 3 See Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren, "Does the World Really Need One More Field of Study?" in *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Method*, ed. Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 116; Timothy Havens, Amanda D. Lotz, and Serra Tinic, "Critical Media Industry Studies: A Research Approach," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2, no. 2 (2009): 234-253; Hesmondhalgh, "Media Industry Studies, Media Production 18 Politics, Theory, and Method in Media Industries Research 245 David Hesmondhalgh. 19 An Industry Perspective: Calibrating the Velocity of Change 256 Jordan Levin. 20 Toward Synthetic Media Industry Research 264 Horace Newcomb. Index 271. Reviews. "We have Holt and Perren's superb book to help us move forward. Media Industries will be of great interest to students and scholars considering an industrial turn in their research. The book can be successfully integrated into existing undergraduate and graduate film and television classes. It can also be taught as the centerpiece of a course. The essay has now appeared in print in an rich and diverse anthology, *Media Industries: History, Theory and Methods*, which was edited by Jennifer Holt and Alisa Perren. It's contributors represent a who's who of contemporary research on how media industries operate and its content span the full spectrum of audio-visual media, including a full consideration of cutting-edge topics such as convergence and globalization." Her forthcoming book *Empires of Entertainment* examines deregulation and the media industries between 1980-1996 and will be published by Rutgers University Press.