
Media Production, a second year university textbook published by the Open University Press, is part of a four volume series called Understanding Media. The collection investigates aspects of audiences, production, and media texts. Media Production, the third book in the series, like its companion texts is concerned with three themes, identified and reinforced by Hesmondhalgh throughout the volume and series. These themes are power; change and continuity; and lastly, knowledge. Hesmondhalgh, as the Course Chair, writes in the preface, “chapters are designed to be rigorous but student-friendly.” Indeed this 191 page book is accessible to undergraduate students and impressively raises the media studies bar by introducing complex concepts, mapping divergent lines of thinking and research clusters, and exposing readers to difficult writers like Michel Foucault and Raymond Williams with clarity and organizational logic.

The book maps out various approaches to understanding media production, from the perspective of producers first and foremost, and secondly, from the view of media institutions and organizations. Media Production is divided into four sections, authored by four corresponding media scholars: chapter 1 (Downey), “Media Industries” (chapter titles are abbreviated here for space); chapter 2 (Hesmondhalgh), “Media Organizations and Media Texts”; chapter 3, (Toynbee), “The Media’s View of the Audience”; and chapter 4, (Ursell), “Working in the Media.”

In the first chapter, Downey engages with the rich symbolic universe of The Simpsons, one of the most ubiquitous, widely recognized and consumed creative artifacts. This long-running animated comedy is theorized as a multi-product empire and unstoppable television force, with perceived liberal bias, that is curiously broadcast by the ultra-conservative Fox network. Downey leverages The Simpsons and illustrates that ownership does not always determine content, and consequently, power and control over media production is a messy, complicated, and unpredictable affair. With this preamble, the discussion of the tension between producer, ownership control, and creativity is launched. Downey moves from this more instrumentalist cultural studies perspective to the notion of a controlled versus free system of media, by way of Raymond Williams. He introduces three approaches to understanding media power and institutions: political economy critique (PEC), market liberalism, and social market analysis. Through this sieve of competing perspectives, different kinds of ownership are examined, followed by a discussion of the intractable topic of taste. Downey argues we “form our preferences from a limited menu,” the results of which can be seen symbolically by Homer’s Duff Beer and by the real world example of Britain’s newspaper “oligopoly” (24). Downey’s chapter, like the three that follow, inevitably moves from concerns of the modern variety to those of the post-modern, describing the transition of Hollywood’s centralized ownership/control system to the post-Fordist, networked-mediascape of global flows. While Downey, emphasizing Hardt and Negri’s work, concurs with market liberals that media conglomeration has not
resulted in decreased diversity concerning media products, he concludes that internationalization of ownership and production is still dominated by the U.S.

In chapter two, Hesmondhalgh raises often overlooked questions concerning the autonomy of media producers working in the culture industries. Referencing interviews with media workers, he writes, “the overwhelming consensus is that media producers operate with high levels of autonomy and independence from the demands of powerful groups in society” (53). Juxtaposing such perceived consensus, Hesmondhalgh introduces Chomsky and Herman’s propaganda model into the equation, albeit with appendages: critiques by Murdock and others who describe the model as “instrumentalist” and “overstated” (57). Three case studies are trotted out (Hall, Negus, and Born), each interrogating spaces that media producers move through when negotiating creative licence and control in the areas of news reportage, rap music, and BBC television, respectively. The studies are excellent examples of how these contact zones of commerce and culture are much more complicated than Chomsky and Herman’s model would suggest, but also much more complex, drawing questions around any kind of “consensus” on the issue of control and influence. Hesmondhalgh’s chapter ultimately reveals that there are all kinds of structural and contextual factors that affect the ways in which media is produced, whether they are indirect or direct, on-the-ground or managerial, instrumental or structural.

In chapter three, Toynbee introduces readers to audience research and the tensions between “knowing the audience,” and surveillance or privacy invasion by media institutions. Smythe and Garnham’s research is deployed in a discussion of the commodification of media and, in particular, audiences as commodified social phenomena handily delivered to advertisers. Gitlin’s invaluable work is drawn on to illustrate the deep penetration advertising has had on media production. The chapter connects with the last with a discussion of the autonomy of media producers/creative workers and ultimately concludes that instrumental power is in decline.

Chapter four (Ursell) picks up from chapter three’s assessment that “creative workers and audiences have less power and less ability to shape the form and quality of their relationship” (130) and analyzes the role of media workers—including the various approaches to researching and theorizing creative workers, from Marxist to market perspectives. While Ursell ultimately divides the chapter into four “approaches to media work” (135), the central argument is perhaps best illustrated in his introduction, where he argues: “[b]ehind every Michael Moore there are a hundred others, working as it were, ‘backstage’” (134). The insinuation—media labour is under-valued and often (made) invisible. The four approaches are drawn out through the lenses of other theorists (such as Foucault) and taken together present an analysis of media workers and their relationships to economic powers and politics; defined as it is by a capitalist system that increasingly values profit margins over labour and skill. Once again, the modern to post-modern trajectory infuses the concluding remarks concerning the culture industries and their transition from Fordism to post-Fordism.

Missing from the discussion is the role and place/space of non-commercial media production, notably alternative grassroots and DIY, where the lines between audiences and producers are intriguingly entangled. When the attention turns to audiences in chapter three, it is from the perspective of powerful media institutions, an...
approach tacitly reminiscent of administrative communication research. Indeed, it is
the inter-spatial “zone” between producer and consumer that is ignored, despite con-
spicuous and empowering labelling of audiences as “producers,” and despite the
likely target demographic of Western students in their early twenties—a group prolif-
ically producing “non-professional” print news, micro-radio, blogs, documentary cin-
ema, podcasts, music, and web-media. Hesmondhalgh argues we are all producers,
but despite such a democratic populist proclamation the focus is nearly exclusively set
on producers operating inside large, industrial, commercial environments, while rad-
ical, alternative, community, grassroots, and artisanal producers and production con-
cerns are left out. Where many introductory university textbooks on media ghettoize
alternative/community media into one inadequate chapter, Media Production avoids
the discussion altogether. For a book purportedly interested in the fundamental ques-
tion of power distribution, articulation, and negotiation within the cultural industries,
it is surprising to discover an exclusive emphasis on mainstream media. As such, this
volume brings students closer to understanding the complex and fluid terrain of
media production within the context of commercial media making.

Media Production explores the political implications for divergent approaches to
understanding and explaining the socio-political and economic complexities of media
production, so that students in the field will have a useful map for an otherwise com-
plicated terrain. In this regard the authors achieve their goal. Yet as is the case with
most comprehensive books on the topic, they do so at the exclusion of non-commer-
cial/alternative media practices, as well as the terminally overlooked landscape of
media text distribution/circulation. Aside from an industrial perspective addressing
media workers in chapter three, media producers as social agents involved in the com-
plex web of creative work, culture, and commerce, needed more attention in this text.
An apt place to start is alternative media-making, where local concerns often trump
global trade flows, and where reflexive community storytelling displaces abstract
profit margins. That said, the book is a sophisticated bridge between some otherwise
complicated communication and cultural studies scholars. In the end Media
Production brings to life the charts, graphs, and theories found in its pages by dividing
up the task of understanding production and doing so with straightforward language
that should resonate with undergraduate students in the field.

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