


Department of Communication

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The aim of this book, as part of the Media in Focus series edited by Simon Cottle, is to provide an understanding of today’s media. The volume sets out to achieve this aim by studying media organization and production as a middle ground between the fields of political economy which relies on the media as industries only, and cultural studies, focusing on media texts primarily.

The scope of the book’s five chapters – each chapter comprises on average two articles – is certainly broad in that its exercise of ‘mapping the field’ includes transnational corporations such as AOL-Time Warner, CNN, Disney, Sony and Bertelsmann, media giants whose commercial operations traverse the globe (e.g., Robert McChesney’s contribution on corporate media and global capitalism). It also examines alternative forms of media production which, out of political hunger or commercial aversion, want to make a difference in civil society (e.g., Chris Atton’s article on organization and production in alternative media).

The four articles in Part 2 and 3 approach media organization and production from a business perspective, since media industries are sites of investment and sources of employment. But at the same time they are different, or as stated by the editor in the introduction: “Media industries
and organizations are different from most other businesses and organizations in that they characteristically produce and purvey commodities and content that are essentially symbolic in nature—and these symbols enter into the life of society. (…) They contribute images and ideas, discourses and debate for the conduct of social relations and the wider engagements of social, cultural political power. (…) Through its symbolic forms and representations, cultural industries also help to constitute and redefine the historically shifting boundaries of ‘public’ and ‘private spheres’ and address us as citizens or consumers” (Cottle, 2003: 4).

A wide range of organizational fields and settings both in Europe and North-America is focused upon, an example is the comparison of organizational culture inside the BBC and CNN, a condensed version of an earlier published book by Lucy Küng-Shankleman. Additionally, the daily dynamic production process of media professionals is looked into in different settings, based upon in-depth qualitative modes of exploration, either through ethnography, semi-structured interviews or archival materials. The experience with developments in information and communications technologies and processes of globalization with a profound impact on production and organization processes in the newspaper industry are documented in the case-study of News Corporation by Timothy Marjoribanks.

The book is certainly inspiring in that it prescribes two angles when analyzing media production dynamics; the first instrumental angle suggests that media professionals are agents whose performances can be adequately explained in terms of proprietary intervention, ruling interests and/or political allegiances. The second viewpoint, the structural determination angle, inverts this focus on agency and maintains that media personnel, whatever their position, are compelled by economic, technological, ideological determinants, while producing media forms and content, and thus are unconsciously and routinely acting in predetermined ways. The complex interplay between agency versus structure, creativity versus constraint, conspiracy versus convention is at stake here and illustrated in a variety of contexts of production of cultural forms such as music journalism and the making of children’s news, both articles based upon undoubtedly meritorious PhD research by respectively Eamonn Forde and Julian Matthews. Paddy Scannell delivers an inspiring historical account of the management of live media in ‘Brains Trust’, the first live, unscripted discussion program on British radio in which the speakers responded spontaneously and without previous knowledge to questions sent in by listeners. The insightful story told by Doris Baltruschat (as part of her Master’s thesis in communications at the university of Leicester) of the dramatically increased international co-productions in Canada aiming at cultural proximity, but looking for
global markets and global stories taking place in Canadian cities that are dressed up like American cities, reflects the changing market conditions and processes of convergence and deregulation. Simon Cottle ends the list of production contexts by documenting the changing ‘production ecology’ of natural history programs; the old-fashioned biology lesson approach made way for the pursuit of strong emotional storylines and more interaction with people.

Although broad in scope and diverse in its selection of production settings — the book gives ample evidence of both the social/cultural and economic dimensions of the public sphere — the political dimension of the public sphere tends to be brushed under the carpet. This is unfortunate since a different choice in production settings, e.g., by choosing a crisis context from which to document the changing processes and patterns of journalistic practices, would have remedied this shortcoming. Moreover, some insight into the history of the institutionalization of media organization and production (i.e., newspaper, telex, radio, television, Internet) would have added a very useful chapter to a relatively short book. Instead of the now perhaps too synchronic patchwork of very insightful accounts of media organization and production settings, the book would benefit from a more diachronic perspective, offering more tools to understand the present.

In all, the book addresses a wide range of media organizations and the ‘production ecology’ of different media genres. The well-written chapters of this book are undoubtedly suited for pedagogical purposes. The cutting-edge style in which current arguments and recent research findings are presented makes this book a useful — if not the only, because of its lack of a more historical perspective — textbook for courses dealing with contemporary issues of media policy, the media as social institutions in complex interplay with government, market and civil society.

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Leen d’Haenens


We live in promotional times. This observation is the starting point of News, Public Relations and Power. Edited by Simon Cottle, this volume in Sage’s Media in Focus series — which partially consists of rewritten teaching material — aims at providing students and lecturers with a com-