book review

New Bottles for New Wine

Sociology and Technology of Today's Television Industry

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Vicki Mayer, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*
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James Bennett and Niki Strange (eds), *Television as Digital Media*
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These two books from that notable publisher of academic texts, Duke University Press, are like twinned crystals of calcite. Each is drawn from the same feedstock, but they are utterly different in alignment.

Television as Digital Media is a collection of thirteen scholarly essays by academics from the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia. Of the editors, James Bennett is senior lecturer in television studies at Royal Holloway, University

of London, while Niki Strange is founder of Strange Digital, a digital business consultancy. She is also a research fellow at the University of Sussex.

The list of authors allows a moment of parochial pride. Four contributors, Graeme Turner, Julian Thomas, Jean Burgess and Jason Jacobs teach at Australian universities. Given that, the lack of any reference in the book's introduction to the Australian experience of the introduction of digital television, alongside that of the United Kingdom, the United States and Europe, is surprising.

There are times when one feels the word 'digital' has become an all too convenient and all embracing talisman for technology change, irrespective of instrumental impact. Certainly, 'digital television' encompasses some examples of radical change like the expansion in the variety of platforms and devices that now may be used to transmit, to receive and to store programs. But not all is revolution. Much digital technology changes little. The digital watch didn't change time; it just made accurate timekeeping cheaper.

Scholars and authors need to be alert to distinguish between digital technology that replicates what analogue technology does, only more cheaply or efficiently, and what digital technology does that cannot be done by analogue technology at all. It is only the latter application of digital technology that modifies production or consumption practices in creative, economic or utilitarian terms, and has consequential outcomes.

For example, digital broadcasting is more economical with spectrum space because of coding and compressions techniques, allowing multi-channelling within the same bandwidth. But, in essence, analogue transmission and digital transmission are no more than different means of achieving the same purpose, the delivery of content without the physical connection of conductive metals or glass fibre cables.

The spectral efficiency of digital broadcasting brought one significant change in Australia: the birth of the digital siblings, the new digital channels. They have multiplied program offerings but that diversity frequently remains illusory. The same program often appears on several channels especially outside prime time. Contrary to FreeView's advertising mantra, new programming is often 'more repeats more often'.

However, multiple program offerings means the fragmentation of the audience of the traditional parent channel and while parent channels have been

losing viewers, total audiences for television seem to be increasing, at least for the present. Fragmentation of audiences as a consequence of digital transmission, and the effect of fragmentation in this, the most networked television nation in the English-speaking world, will take time to discover.

These changes and the diversifying uses content is put to are issues discussed at length in social and cultural terms by the various authors in *Digital Television*. The essays are grouped under four themes: Switchover: Historicizing the Digital Revolution; Production Strategies in the Digital Landscape; The Aesthetics of Convergence; and User Generated Content: Producing Digital Audiences.

It is true that the broadcasters themselves have changed. They are now digital media agents rather than broadcasters and these transformations are addressed, especially in 'Is it TV Yet?' by William Boddy, which concludes the opening section Switchover: Historicising the Digital Revolution. Before Boddy, Graeme Turner discusses the worldwide move to digital television broadcasting and Julian Thomas looks back at the slow transformation of television from pre-programmed mass entertainment to an individualised interactive medium.

In Production Strategies in the Digital Landscape, Roberta Pearson examines cult television for its innovative qualities, and Niki Strange evaluates the BBC's 'Bundled Project'. Jeanette Streemers is pessimistic that the new media will deliver better screen experiences to pre-school children and that for them 'multiplatform television may continue to be dominated by the existing players for a long while yet to come'. (175)

In The Aesthetics of Convergence, Karen Lucy argues that 'broadcast television's previous operations—such as the creation of shared intimacy, empathy and social cohesion' for the audience have been replaced in the digital age by a desire 'to control them'. (182) She uses the manipulations of the program *ITV Play* by station management as an example. She then examines digital production technologies such as CGI, digital matting and faux archival effects for its potential to create false relationships between individuals, places and events, especially in history programming.

Max Dawson considers the emergence of the digital short film both in mainstream broadcasting and on Facebook and YouTube, and argues that 'television's digital shorts have developed their own native aesthetic, an *aesthetic of*

efficiency, characterized by streamlined exposition, discontinuous montage and ellipsis, and decontextualized narrative or visual spectacle'. (206)

Daniel Chamberlain examines the media interfaces that are 'the visible tip of the software layers that increasingly structures our engagement with text audio and video'. (231) He finds them 'now scripted, now coded' and worthy of investigation as part of 'the suite of critical and conceptual tools available for the study of television and media'. (252) Julian Thomas's remarks in 'When Digital was New' about the remote control are pertinent here.

Jason Jacobs completes the section with his appreciation of 'television's profoundly interrupted nature', and a consideration of digital technology's impact on broadcasting and other screen media such as on line video games and the place of non content-consistent interruptions.

The emergence and utility of user-generated content is examined the final section, *User-Generated Content*. As with the introduction of desktop publishing two decades ago, digital video cameras and PC- or Mac-based editing has put the production of (potentially) quality production within the financial reach of many individuals and small groups. As desktop publishing saw established standards of graphic design and taste come under attack from a blizzard of fonts, break-outs and banners, so now the established standards of visual language, evolved in cinema and adopted by television, are being assaulted by erratic camerawork, unmotivated editing and strangled sound.

John T. Caldwell points out that 'studio and network lawyers now obsessively guard proprietary screen content ... while their very own marketing departments down the hall bulk-load and hand out their proprietary screen content as promotional fodder and fan-bait across the internet', (284) suggesting a two faced attitude to piracy. He goes on to explore how digital technologies have disrupted traditional industry distinctions and hierarchies in management and production, and have also encouraged the professionalisation of amateur video making.

Jean Burgess agues the value of a 'cultural and media studies' heritage in understanding the activity and value of audiences' and, in particular, television audiences, saying it 'makes the field peculiarly able to offer important insights into ... the cultural implications of user-created content'. (313) James Bennett then concludes the section with an examination of personalities in internet television,

specifically Kevin Rose and Alex Albrecht of Digg Nation and a new class of celebrity, the internet celebrity.

In drawing on a wide range of authors, each having contrasting ideas and concerns, *Television as Digital Media* is a valuable snapshot of current theorising and critical thinking in this time of technical convergence and social media innovation.

It is also an example of the need for editorial and lexical precision. New media studies is where technology and sociology meet, where media studies must use the language of the engineer or spectrum planner, and local usage need be avoided for a text to travel well.

For example, Karen Lucy deploys 'terrestrial' and 'digital' as antinomies when describing television services provided by British broadcaster ITV, (185) and Julian Thomas uses 'bandwidth' when, more correctly, he might say 'range of uses or applications'. (53)

Vicki Mayer's, *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*, is a very different text.

The title, *Below the Line,* is drawn from traditional film budgeting practice where 'above the line' costs are those associated with the creative talent in front and behind the camera and 'below the line' are the costs of materials and artisans, transport and accommodation, require to make the picture. Below the line people are the people that interest Mayer.

Mayer takes a wider view of what is required to make television happen in the 'new television economy', and this perspective is explored in the introduction 'Who are Television's Producers?' But here too are examples of the potential for confusion when technical language and social analysis intersect.

In the introduction, Mayer challenges the reader to consider 'the twenty-two-year-old woman working [on] the assembly line in an international export zone' as one of television's producers. (1) The worker can 'fix a broken solder machine while affixing the hot wires to a chassis'. Now the word 'hot' in television design practice does not mean thermally hot but electrically charged, and a hot chassis is one that operated at a lethal voltage above earth. It was a design practice used to minimise the cost of the generations of television receivers that used thermionic valves, and may still apply to those that use thermionic picture tubes.

Mayer outlines her purpose as 'by looking into an expanded conceptual field for television production, this book attempts to make inroads into questions around how workers identify themselves in the new television economy. (23)

Below the Line is divided into two major parts. Part One 'looks at the tropes of the creative and the professional, which have historically been crucial to identifying producers as an occupational status in the US'. (23) Here, Meyer first examines 'the twenty-two-year-old woman working [on] the assembly line in an international export zone', (1) Manaus in Brazil, and her co-workers. (24) Secondarily, she explores 'the work worlds of soft-core videographers who, travelling between shooting locations, sell content that frequently finds its way into television through its paid programs and infomercials. (24)

Mayer's soft-core videographers are not necessarily concerned with pornography, as the name might suggest, though some border on that field. They are a cohort of video paparazzi, mostly male, and owners and/or operators of high-end video equipment. Not traditional industry freelancers as such, but 'practitioners who define themselves as video and television professionals, despite their utter exclusion from the industry's visible hierarchies and tangible benefits.

Her encounters with them centre on the New Orleans Mardi Gras between 2004 and 2006, an event that, she reports, attracts more than fifty of these videographers. Their footage is compiled and copies marketed to tourists, or on-sold to video producers of 'home videos, pay-per-view specials, global satellite programming, and a ubiquitous series of infomercials that have been the stable of late-night cable advertising sales'. (68)

These two revealing studies are seamed through with the history of the rise and fall of the role and status of mainstream television producer in the US industry, a story that was both intriguing and historically valuable.

Part Two 'further expands our notions of the television producer with an investigation of the blurring lines between producer and sponsor and between producer and regulator'. (25) In the first instance, the study is of 'the men and women [who] find suitable cast members for the spate of reality programs that now dominate television programming'. (25) Mayer's intention is to consider 'the different ways in which identification contributes to the values of program brands,

audiences, and laborers as three types of commodities in television program production'. (25)

The success of these reality programs depends not so much on format or production values but in the character and qualities of its cast members. (The degree to which the Australian Master Chef outperformed its British prototype is largely due to the choice of contestants and the judges.) Thus, Mayer argues, significant influence over the success of these types of programs rests with the casting agents. These reality casting agents represent a new segment of the craft but the scant literature on casting agents is 'confined to personal recollection of casters or to studies of who is cast'. (109) In terms of reality casting agents, Mayer's work goes some way to redress that lack of scholarly study.

The last part of *Below the Line* 'turns to the role of everyday citizens in the United States as regulators, a burden that has increasingly shifted onto local municipalities since the 1970s to safeguard public-access production'. (25) Here Mayer takes Australian readers into unfamiliar territory. Public access broadcasting emerged in the United States as a direct consequence of the widespread adoption of cable television reticulation in competition with, or in place of, radiated free-to-air broadcasting.

Unlike Australian pay-TV operators, US cable companies were mandated to carry the free-to-air broadcasters and provide community access, in addition to their own programs. Mayer contrasts the volunteer labour expended in the numerous rounds of consultations to maintain community access to a changing technical and commercial cable business with the little power 'these new everyday regulators have over actual communication policy. (172) She also notes two that the 'regulators definition of public interest privileged those at the top of local class and cultural hierarchies, while classifying everyone else in categories to be sold to advertisers'. (172) One is tempted to mutter 'what else is new' at that point?

Mayer's book is largely concerned with the ethnography and sociology of selected communities on the fringe of the traditional professional mainstream of television production. All her studies are interesting in themselves, and the work with videographers and casting agents opens new ground in media studies, though the chapter on regulators has limited value within the Australian context. The videographers and casting agents, however, are to me parts of an expanded

mainstream of television production brought about by technological development. They are not flood channels or billabongs largely independent of the mainstream, and TV assembly workers and community regulators are riparian functions to the television production sector. They have all been part of the ecosystem of the industry.

Both *Below the Line* and *Television as Digital Media* are well referenced and footnoted, and both have extensive bibliographies—always most useful. Each is worthy of a place on the bookshelves of Australian media students and academics.

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