



Book Review

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Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York University Press: New York, 2019; x + 353 pp.; ISBN 9781479846894, \$30.00

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In the late 2000s, a new and exciting cultural phenomenon was bubbling under the surface. Around the world, teens in their bedrooms were turning on their webcams to film asynchronous conversations with unknown audiences and upload them on YouTube. Online communities started to flourish on the platform and new genres began to crystallise: vlogs, tutorials, comedy sketches and video responses. In these early years, being a ‘YouTuber’ was not yet a viable career, there was no monetisation on the platform and no brand deals, and creator culture mainly flew under the radar of mainstream media organisations, or else was viewed as trivial or insignificant.

A lot has changed in the last decade. Slow at first and then accelerating into an unstoppable juggernaut, we have seen the rise of a new cross-platform creative industry, what Cunningham and Craig have dubbed ‘Social Media Entertainment’ (SME). In this most impressive and timely book, *Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*, they chart the emergence of SME as a legitimate competitor to and collaborator with legacy screen media. What began as pockets of amateur creators on YouTube has grown into a mature infrastructure of diverse and competing platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat and Twitter, that combine online video and social networking affordances with opportunities for entrepreneurial content creators to cultivate ‘diverse business models and revenue streams’ (p. 5).

The book takes an ‘ecological’ approach to anatomizing this industry, investigating its constitutive elements: platforms and affordances, content innovation and creative labour, monetisation and management, new forms of media globalisation, and critical cultural concerns (p. 6). Their ambitious goals are to contribute revisionist accounts in the political economy of new media, extend the debate on creative labour, construct an account of commercial online video culture as a highly normative space driven by appeals to authenticity and community, and assess claims for a new wave of media globalisation achieved without Internet Protocol (IP) control.

Particularly praiseworthy is the extensive research carried out for the book. Cunningham and Craig conducted over 150 interviews with creators, platform and

intermediary executives and managers, talent agents, technology integrators, and policy makers in geographical locations spanning the United States, Australia, Shanghai, Berlin, Beijing, London and Mumbai, as well as attending industry events such as VidCon US and assisting in the development of pop-up YouTube Spaces. The rigour of this research pays off in the rich details and insights offered throughout the book, particularly in regard to industry actors such as talent agents and executives, which strikes me as the key strength of their work.

Cunningham and Craig also gained interview access to a number of high-profile American content creators, no mean feat in itself, such as Joey Graceffa, Hank and John Green, Gigi Gorgeous, Rhett and Link, Ingrid Nilsen, and Tati Westbrook. As such, the emphasis throughout the book is firmly on the highly professionalised (US-centric) side of the online video industry, as opposed to the vast majority of creators who are struggling to gain visibility or income, and who do not have talent agents or brand recognition. This, I would argue, goes some way to explaining the at times overly celebratory and utopian tone of the book. For example, they argue that despite some adversity, the experiences of online content creators 'can still bear favourable comparison with the average aspirant in Hollywood, an industry notorious for requiring years of underpaid dues paying and apprenticeships in toxic and demanding positions' (p. 12). In my own research interviewing YouTube content creators large and small, I have not found this to be the case. The large and successful creators are the exceptions to the rule, and not representative of the average creator's extremely challenging and precarious working environment.

In the same vein, Chapter 5 'Cultural Politics of Social Media Entertainment' applauds SME for its broader representations of race, sexuality, gender and progressive politics than legacy media. While this is undoubtedly the case and incredibly important to highlight, the book at times lacks critical analysis with regards to issues of power and inequality. While reading this chapter in particular, I found myself asking who is allowed visibility and who is marginalised in SME, and whether the dominance of neoliberal values and brand culture are problematic? Similarly, what about the impacts of problematic content and behaviours on YouTube that have garnered so much public attention in the last couple of year, such as trolling, paedophilia, pranks gone too far and the alt-right? Attentiveness to these sorts of issues arguably would have strengthened the analysis.

In and among their wide-ranging aims, the core thesis of the book is that SME constitutes a 'radical *cultural* and *content* challenge' (p. 5) to established media, far greater than on-demand streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Video. As they argue at the outset,

It would be little overstatement to claim that these dynamics are a huge experiment in seeking to convert vernacular or informal creativity into talent and content increasingly attractive to advertisers, brands, talent agencies, studios, and venture-capital investors on a near global scale – with implications for content/entertainment formats, production cultures, industry structures, and measurement of audience engagement . . . (p. 5)

I could not agree more and a book such as this, that presents a rigorous overview of this major new cultural industry, is long overdue. It is of great benefit to scholars of

media and communications and creative industries that Cunningham and Craig are leading the charge, and this book is equally an asset to industry professionals, content creators and online video enthusiasts. My hope is that many more scholarly works will follow that will pay closer attention to different aspects of this industry, such as the lived experience of creators, audience perspectives, and genre conventions and cultural norms.

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