The Importance of Distribution

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A particularly refreshing aspect of this first “Media Industries Project” conference was its emphasis on distribution. Distribution involves the movement of a media product—a magazine, a movie, a radio show, a music recording, a newspaper, a web page—from the site of its production to the point where it will be exhibited to the public. In addition to involving transportation of the product, physically or digitally, distribution involves marketing the product to the target audience and convincing the exhibitors (the theaters, stores, internet service providers) to encourage the audience to connect with the product. To be successful, a movie needs the right release patterns and promotional scheme, exposure in the right theaters and/or (via DVD) in the right Walmarts and/or (via the internet) in the right position on Netflix, the iTunes App Store, and Amazon's Appstore. The same holds for a magazine, radio show, newspaper, and web page. Whether and how that happens is often a story of industrial power, marketing prowess, political clout, sometimes criminal leverage, and more.

In the academic study of media systems distribution often takes a far back seat to production. That is particularly evident in research into media processes. There certainly are exceptions, particularly in studies of the movie industry. But for the most part sociological explorations into the workings of the television, newspaper, book, and even advertising industries have focused on the forces that create the content. It’s understandable. After all, content-production is often the topic of public discussion and policy debate, and it might seem easier to make a case for the importance of a research project—and a book—by focusing on the making of the product.


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Nevertheless, a strong case can be made that distribution is at least as important as production for players in a media industry, for the audiences that the production firms target, and for the society in which all this takes place. It is a basic business proposition that products will not succeed without having an outlet to potential end-buyers. Distribution clout has long been a factor in sustaining the power of the Hollywood majors in the U.S. and around the world. With the right amount of financial backing, anyone can make an expensive movie. It takes an elaborate and historically situated circulation system, though, to guide a movie through the labyrinthine competition involving release dates, windows, formats, and platforms that makes up today’s film business. Though no distribution systems are quite the same, approaches to distribution can affect (and have affected) the fate of all media products, from television shows to graphic novels to greeting cards.

Two journalistic works I have found especially helpful in underscoring the importance of distribution are Les Brown’s *Television: The Business Behind the Box* (published in 1971) and Don Charnas’ *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip Hop* (published in 2010). Brown’s book is a terrific exploration of how the television networks operated to set America’s most shared entertainment agenda at the height of their distribution power. Charnas’ book details the rough-and-tumble social and business environments that incubated rap music and then pushed it into wider and wider orbits of airplay and record sales. Among the academic books, Thomas Guback’s *The International Film Industry* (1969) is a classic excursion into the Hollywood’s distribution power beyond U.S. borders, while Matt McAllister’s *The Commercialization of American Culture: New Advertising, Control and Democracy* (1995) is a helpful journey into the forces guiding distribution platforms for advertisements in the midst of a media system with splintered audiences, multiplying print and video channels, and on the cusp of a new digital age. At the conference, the critical nature of distribution came out in discussions of the policy tensions around Comcast and Net neutrality as well as the developments guiding creations (including advertising) across digital platforms.

All these works point out distribution that has social importance in addition to its business importance. Whether and how certain content systems and not others make it in front of audiences can help determine what people consider important, what they talk about, and even why. One can write a long essay on the social difference it makes that Will Eisner’s graphic novels found an audience. Hollywood’s ability to show up consistently in movie theaters throughout Europe from after World War I have had enormous impact on the film industries of European countries and—more than a few observers suggest—on how generations of Europeans understood popular culture and America. Today a variety of storytelling forms and creative collaborations vie for attention on the internet’s “long tail” while dominant distribution platforms—for example, websites tied to popular offline
media magazines, newspapers, or television networks—struggle to strengthen their distribution footing in a realm where audiences have balked at subscribing and advertisers will not cover the costs.

The distribution of content has always had social consequences. *Net Worth* underscored for me the importance of exploring those consequences across media industries as we move deeper and deeper into the digital world.