

Nitin Govil

“Spectrums – Media Industries Roundtable Discussion.” With Jennifer Holt, Toby Miller, and Ellen Seiter. *Spectator* 31.1 (Spring 2011): 48-54

Nitin Govil, Jennifer Holt, & Toby Miller

# Spectrums - Media Industries

## Roundtable Discussion

Moderator: Ellen Seiter

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### Abstract

This roundtable discussion took place on February 27, 2010 as the keynote address for the 4th Annual ZdC Graduate Student Conference. Addressing the state of media industry studies, this conversation was intended to explore its status within the field of film and media studies, its distinct research challenges, and its future directions of investigation.

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**Ellen Seiter:** What made you turn from a more traditional film studies, or textual analysis, or film theory mode, to thinking about media industries?

**Jennifer Holt:** A lot of it is personal. Part of it has to do with what kind of person you are and what kind of information you gravitate toward. I never was really excited about philosophical or theoretical thinking, but I was really excited by historical thinking and practical matters. I have attorneys in my family and I think that if I had not become a professor I would have been an attorney, so I think this is where my mind naturally went. I feel happy when my feet are grounded materially dealing in matters of industry. My skills are more suited to this type of study.

**Toby Miller:** Well I never really studied these things, so I don't really have an answer. But I do have an answer to this that I would have had if I had studied this. My friends who studied literature in college didn't know how books were made, didn't know how books were sold, didn't know how books were reviewed, didn't know what books physically were, couldn't really describe them. Here's my latest. (Throws book into audience – laughter)

**Nitin Govil:** He's got fourteen more!

**ES:** If you ask the right question he'll throw one at you.

**TM:** People who studied the media, whether they were in these departments that I'd never heard of, like film or communications or whatever, they all knew what film was physically: they knew its history as an object, they knew how it was sold, they knew who owned it. In other words they were interested in the totality of its life as an aesthetic object, something that was created, something that travelled, something that went on to be perceived and then had another life and interpretation. This struck me as extremely interesting and much more valuable than the bizarre history of the book, which came from nowhere but just told verities. Therefore the idea of there being a choice or a trajectory from close reading to what is the biography of these objects wasn't there for me. I was very struck by the fact that that it seemed to was already present by contrast with literary studies.

**NG:** This question, in some ways, is an interesting question because it is a new way to cast the

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Ellen Seiter, Toby Miller, Jennifer Holt, and Nitin Govil

debate. Folks know that in the 1980s and 1990s there were these juxtapositions between political economy, cultural studies, etc. And these things show up, especially in job visits when faculty members ask you questions. They are trying to figure out, “Where are you?” “Are you one of us?” “Are you one of them?” The “us” and the “them” are colored and gendered in exactly the same way you would expect. So I understand politically and strategically where these distinctions come from. For me at least, there is much more continuity between these types of things. And I think the field itself, if we want to think about a field that connects what we do together, is not necessarily a rejection of textuality but a *disaggregation* of textuality. It’s a more expansive notion at this point, and maybe since a lot of us are interested in media practices, this is the way that textuality has re-entered the debate.

**ES:** What are some common or even frustrating criticisms that you encounter when you present your work? What kinds of critiques do you get?

**JH:** I think that a couple of things come to mind. When writing about the issue of ownership, I find people are desperate for me to be overtly political in my assessment of developments. I don’t feel compelled to do that. What I am really interested in is legal history and policy

history. I must be really frustrating to some people in the way that I refuse to rant against media consolidation. There might be people who really want you to write a certain way but if you don’t feel compelled to do that then don’t. Write what you feel compelled to write about. I think the quality of your work will be much better.

The other thing I find in doing contemporary media studies is the resistance of some to be able to read across media. My forthcoming book, *Empires of Entertainment*, for example, had a reviewer say “this isn’t a cable history.” I was feeling the whole time I was writing it that I should just re-title it as “The History of Cable” because I realized that this particular history is a history of cable more than anything. One thing that I’ve encountered is that there are ways of reading texts and practicing your field that don’t necessarily always translate with the way that people who think about industries look at it.

**ES:** What do you think are the burning issues in studying media industries?

**NG:** I think one of the issues is... “What is an industry?” What exactly do we mean by that term? I have spent quite a lot of time studying the moment when the Indian film practitioners and trade was granted industry status in India in

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1998. I wanted to look at that moment when what we take to be self-evident actually gets constituted in certain forms of practice. Where do we draw boundaries? I think convergence is one of the ways to think about this but sometimes it asks the right questions, but comes up with the wrong answers or sometimes the other way around. In some ways it's a conceptual problem to think about, "what is an industry?" Is piracy an industry? Classically, we've been saying no, because of levels of inputs, outputs, etc. It doesn't necessarily classically conform. But I think that we would all understand that in terms of modes of distribution, it maps onto a lot of industrial practices. Even if we take the marginally agreed upon definition of an industry, I think that we have to understand that notion is in crisis.

The crisis of how we define an industry is a crisis of enumeration and a problem of models. It's a data problem and a question of *how* do you count and what do you count. What do you do with the numbers once you get them? I think that these are some of the things that the industries are questioning and working through. You can think about IP as a way to enter into thinking about it, or piracy is a way of entering into thinking about that. In the west we think of piracy as this spectacular form. But it's the everyday in 99% of the world. There's this seepage and leakage between formality and informality that is actually constitutive of industrial practice in most of the world and along with this there's a kind of functional understanding of how informality works. Hollywood is especially trying to figure that out and I think academically we are also trying to figure that out.

**JH:** Well, in studying industries, there are several questions everybody should ask himself or herself. Do I want to also study economics? Am I interested in accounting? Am I interested in policy? Am I interested in understanding the law or legal history? All of that is going to come up when you're trying to understand various questions and crises. Maybe on the surface they don't sound very interesting, but once you start doing some of this research, it's completely fascinating. I was meeting with a very high profile attorney the other day, who said to me, "if you don't understand the intersection

of finance and accounting, you have no idea what you're even talking about when talking about media industries." I didn't even know there *was a difference* between finance and accounting. And he's talking about this specialized intersection. When we explained it all, it was all about the way that various costs were amortized and when and how that actually dictated release patterns. These are things that you have to be willing to plunge into as a scholar of media industries.

Off of Nitin's point, for me one of the most fascinating things is how do we define markets and where we draw boundaries around markets. This has to do with policy and how markets are defined through case law, how judges have adjudicated the matters of markets, and how policy is defining markets. Right now, the way that markets are defined, are so completely divorced from the actual technological potential and possibilities and capabilities that we have. The language and the philosophical foundation of policy is divorced from the realities of the marketplace. Then, of course, there is the crisis in business models. How do we find a way to monetize this exodus to the digital space? And what does that mean for labor when something like 75% of pilots were not shot in LA this past season? The crisis in business models has a ripple effect for arenas of industry study and that's pretty much what everybody in the business is focused on right now.

**TM:** I have four themes that I think are important: the first is political theory, specifically the state of democracy, and how screen culture relates to that. For maybe a third of its life, Hollywood was not protected by the 1st Amendment because the Supreme Court did not consider film speech. What that means between 1915-1952, is that it assumes that dramatic representation is not part of democracy.

The second issue is environmentalism. The whole of media historiography needs to be re-written, starting from the moment when vellum is the dominant source of creating books, and documents, right through to the emergence of paper, to the role of people like rag pickers, who were the people who collected disused clothing



Jennifer Holt

and made that into what became the beginnings of European-style parchment. For the last 35 years Rochester has been the most polluted city in New York state. Guess why. Because of the beloved film industry and what that's done to its water system – hundreds of thousands of times higher in pollution than the EPA can find virtually anywhere else, including in some of the heavy industry areas of the world. The environmental questions have to be at the core of a comprehensive re-writing of media historiography.

The third issue that has already been mentioned by my colleagues is labor because the precariat is the group that is now dominant numerically, if not in power terms, in the media industries. People who often come from middle class backgrounds, whose parents, had health insurance, education, political entre and so on, and who themselves have education, had political entre, maybe had health care, are not getting those things within the sectors where they are working. This isn't just happening here. It's happening throughout the Western Europe. It's happening in Japan. And in some ways you could say this is when Post-Fordism really kicks in.

The last thing is we need to get rid of film schools, like this one (USC) – they have to be closed down. Because they are guilty of falsehood in

advertising, they are a waste of resources, and they are anachronistic in terms of their aesthetic and their notion of what counts. I think that we need to be straightforward and honest about where universities in the United States function and what they do.

**ES:** What do you think about the distinction between film and television as it matters both in the academy and the media industries? And music for that matter, what would be the kind of questions you would encourage people to ask? What are some models for looking at those?

**JH:** I always tell my students who think they're going to make film, that they're not going to be making films, they're going to be making TV. And they need to think about that in a different way, they need to be thinking about what kind of producers they want to be, and accept that most likely it's not going to be of feature films, which they all think they're going to be doing. To me, all of these companies, the five or six giant companies, they're all just cable companies, right? I mean feature film is *nothing* in their revenue pie. With the whole Comcast merger, they didn't even care if they got NBC in the deal. They probably would've been happier if they didn't and it was all about NBC's cable properties. The most valuable property in that whole deal was USA network. It's the most profitable business in NBC/Universal. So I think when we think about these companies, there is a certain privilege that is usually afforded to the film industry when, if you're going to privilege financials and if you're going to privilege economics, if that's going to be your measure, then it's all about cable. What has been propping up the ability for these companies to make film is cable production and cable business. I think if we want to even understand how the film industry works we have to understand how cable works. Without the cable business they wouldn't have money to make half the films they do. I don't really see any difference in studying them in terms of looking at conglomerates. They're all one big masthead. Of course there are aesthetic issues, textual issues, different modes of production that matter, different business models, but from an economic standpoint, a lot of those barriers dissolve.

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**ES:** Let's use that as a chance to think about the global contexts of media industries. What other kinds of burning issues do you see there, especially with this kind of financial crisis at hand?

**NG:** One of the reasons I wanted to study Hollywood in India was that I felt that if one could locate Hollywood in a particular place, one could dislocate it as this universalist narrative. I found out very quickly that Hollywood just didn't matter in India. We're closing in on the first century of Hollywood. Hollywood has been in India for all that time and it's remarkable how little impact it has made in the kind of classic registers of economic infiltration in the same way we think about Hollywood and Brazil, Britain, Hollywood and Germany. Studying within an Indian context, "tropicalizing Hollywood," if you like, helped to move it away from the standard ways that it gets talked about. I found that it was really useful as a way of thinking about Indian media and American media as mutual points of contamination. Let's look at the specific points and practices through which Hollywood encounters this kind of space. I felt that doing this work, both ethnographically and archivally, was really useful because there are lots of very interesting stories to be told, and lots of very interesting conclusions to be drawn, and some of those things are useful for our contemporary context. One of my pet peeves, and this is maybe relates to what Ellen was asking earlier, is in terms of what are some of the mistakes that we make. And I think that there are two primary ones. We believe what we read and what we're told. When we are doing ethnographic work in the industries this is a real danger. On the one hand, there's the overwhelming array of statistics that are thrown out all the time: film makes x money, this many people worked on it, etc. Those numbers take on a kind of constituency and logic of their own, and then they get quoted and thrown out, at conferences. This is especially a big problem with Bollywood, the byword.

Another problem is believing what we're told when we do ethnographic work within the industry themselves. This'll maybe get us to the next question: when you speak to the CEO, when you speak to the CFO versus what type of investment

do you have when you speak to the chaiwala, or the clapper boy, or the junior artist. How are you supposed to calibrate, the moment of the ethnographic encounter? What do you do with the evidence that is given? I know that Jen has done a lot of this kind of work – it's a real challenge. And I don't mean that you reject one in favor of the other but there's this constant negotiation and I think that's more and more of a challenge as we do global work.

**ES:** So what are some of the special problems that you encounter when doing media industry work, whether from having informants be people currently employed in the media industries, or by running into proprietary information and therefore blocked access.

**JH:** I think Nitin brought up a great point, which is the necessity of just framing your sources as they need to be. When you speak to the people at the highest level, first of all, they're not always the best source for information, and second of all, they are the most invested in a particular kind of sell, a particular rhetoric, a particular image, and that is mainly their function in a lot of ways. So you have to just know and accept that if you get that huge interview, it has to be contextualized as such. For example, I was able to interview Jack Valenti as a grad student and I sat there and I said, well, "Can we talk about Hollywood's anti-trust problems?" And he said, "Anti-trust problems!



Toby Miller

What are you talking about?! Hollywood's never had any anti-trust problems." And I was thinking, "yes they have, and I'm writing a book about it. What are you talking about?" You have to know how to use these sources for what they are. I think always going down a level or two will get you the juiciest day-to-day, how things work, that becomes the most valuable. Official sources, like trade discourse, has to be thought of as a particular discourse not swallowed whole and just accepted as that. I think when so many of us get our research from the trades, that has to be supplemented with so many other types of information. I think just really being conscious of whom you're talking to and what that person is invested in when you're thinking about doing interviews is crucial...

**NG:** I think that doing work in India, it's maybe a little different because sometimes it's very, very easy to get access to corporate types, depending on where you are. Bombay's a little harder now than it used to be because there're more people with MBAs. Delhi, because it's always had this sort of slimy presence of democracy, has always been a bit easier to get into. The problem is that it's not possible to have people sign releases and get any information out of them. As researchers we need to transform the information that we have into the type of information that we can use and publish. You can think about it as moving from



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the empirical to the anecdotal. You have some information, you have a nugget of information, you can't use it and identify the source, and so it has to take anecdotal form. I was in the office of the head of the UIP in India that distributed *Jurassic Park*, which is often seen as the touchstone for Hollywood's rebirth in India. The figure had been thrown around in the past press, twenty million tickets or twenty million dollars, or something like that. And he said to me, absolutely straight-faced, that he had completely made the number up. This happens a lot. It doesn't necessarily only happen over there, it happens over here - especially with numbers. This is why one has to be really weary. I don't want to say that our task becomes that we need to somehow verify and find out exactly how many tickets were sold. You can also get some very interesting information and anecdotes from people lower down on the food chain, oftentimes much more interesting information about the day-to-day partially because "those people" escape the radar of journalism.

**ES:** What about the digital? How do you do industrial archival research in the 21st century?

**TM:** I think that as in any era, particularly with Hollywood, the best thing to happen is that there is a law case. And a law case, really goes a long way. Lots and lots of emails can be found and there are now lots of anxieties on the part of the big corporations about maintaining emails because of the, the complexities with privacy issues, with the role of telephone companies, and other information service providers, and so forth. So a lot more has to be retained now and potentially a lot more can be found. Are we as researchers who don't have the state on our side, or the corporation on our side, going to be able to get that? Probably not. But the idea that it's all gone isn't quite as true as that may seem. But you need a good, juicy law case. So trying to select research topics that have gone to litigation is always good because often then you find out, for instance, where the money really went. And you also get made public various documents, like a Selznick memo, or something like that, that's very rich and exciting. The other part of this, of course, is that archives, understood very broadly are things that were once thought of

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as a burden only. Sometimes they're now thought of as potentially things you can monetize.

**TM:** Ellen, would it be alright if you would like to say anything about these topics? You're actually, not by contrast with my colleagues but in contrast with me, a much more distinguished person when dealing with a lot of this.

**ES:** Well, a couple things that I think are interesting: one is that most of us have students who are moving in and out of industries in a casual way, are great sources of information. But the degree

to which everybody (including unpaid interns) have to sign non-disclosure agreements, combined with the crackdown on getting IRB permission for things that you're publishing, is having a very chilling effect. I do think that disgruntled workers in any industry, and certainly Hollywood produces a lot of disgruntled workers are a great source. But it's difficult and it's interesting to think about. It goes back to the issue of the precariat. I do think that partly as a result of the strikes, the Writer's Guild strike and that sort of thing, there is more worry, everybody's more worried about getting work, and that making it all a little more difficult.

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