

TRASH OR TREASURE?

Innovation and creativity in Media Production

We usually think of media industries as creative and innovative places, where creative skills and new ideas are the difference between success and failure. But there is a long tradition of media researchers questioning the media industries' image of themselves. In 1933 Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* developed a critique of 'cultural industries' which argued that the media produce a propagandistic, 'mass culture'. Far from innovation and creativity, this involves recycling old formulas and trashy formats. Following this tradition, writers such as Bordwell (1985) argued that media production follows the mass production principles of the manufacturing industry, the media producer no more creative than a factory worker on an assembly line.

More recent writers have argued that the emergence of new platforms has transformed the media. According to this view, cable and video on demand, for example, have led to a new era of 'Quality TV', a creative style of TV production which compares with some of the best forms of cinema (see Edgerton and Jones, 2008). Some writers – like Davies and Sigthorsson (2013) – have argued that the need for media companies to deliver greater innovation in their products, caused by greater competition between media industries, has brought a transformation in media production. As media industries have become more competitive, this has required more innovation and so more 'flexibility' than mass production methods could achieve. In this view, flexibility requires media companies to hire workers on freelance or short-term contracts, making media production a very 'precarious' job.

So, who is right? Is media production creative, routine or somewhere in-between? Should we believe the 'mass culture' theorists who see only formulas and mass production or the proponents of flexibility, who see precarious work as the price of innovation? Are the media really like other industries or are they not really 'industries' at all?



KEY IDEAS

HBO, the producer of *Game of Thrones* is often cited as a producer of Quality TV. The company's brand tagline – "It's Not TV, It's HBO" – tried to emphasise this distinction. The emergence of platforms like Netflix and Amazon Video have caused many writers to identify a new "Golden Age" of TV, which has emerged after the decline of TV networks (like the BBC and ITV in the UK and NBC and ABC in the US). But a recent report by Ofcom (2018) showed that in the UK the most watched show on Netflix was not any of the quality dramas the platform has become known for (such as *House of Cards* or *The Crown*) but the sitcom *Friends*. Rather than a cinematic "Quality" series, *Friends* is a 25-year old, network produced, multi-camera studio production, filmed with a studio audience and a "laugh track".

So, does this mean audiences prefer "mass produced" studio shows to Quality TV? Or could it mean that the differences between these two forms of media production are less clear than media theorists have thought? In *Understanding Media Production* (2019) an approach called "evolutionary economics" is used to compare production processes across a range of media types – from feature films, to entertainment formats to letsplay videos. This helps to tease out these questions of innovation – how new are these formats? – and creativity – how varied or routine are the jobs media workers do and how much time do they have to create a TV show or news report?

KEY READINGS

Bordwell et al. (1988). *The classical Hollywood cinema: Film style and mode of production to 1960.* 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Dwyer, P. (2019). *Understanding media production.* London & New York: Routledge.

Edgerton, G., & Jones, J. (Eds.). (2008). *The essential HBO reader.* Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky.

Horkheimer, M. & Adorno, T. (1944). 'The Culture Industry', from *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London: Verso. Available from: bit.ly/2YrArKX.

An Epic at Sea: The Making of Pirates of The Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl
Available from: bit.ly/2RIKOQ4

Cute Animals YouTube channel
Available from: bit.ly/2slhCbG

Woman Dog and Pups (1901)
Available from: bit.ly/2rWquu5

ACTIVITIES

1. *An Epic at Sea: The Making of Pirates of The Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl* (see Key Readings) is a "behind the scenes" documentary about the making of the first film in the series, including interviews with actors and producers. Watch this and make notes about how far you think these media workers describe what they do in terms of creativity or routine work?
2. YouTube and Instagram are often seen as the home of innovations in media. Before their arrival, it's unlikely a channel like *Cute Animals* (on YouTube) would have attracted half a million viewers. But the films on this channel are very similar to the short film *Woman Dog and Pups* (1901) – apart from the dress and ribbons of the woman.
 - i. Is there a genre of cute animal videos?
 - ii. What has changed since the 19th Century about these animal videos?
3. Now look at a Letsplay Gaming Video, on YouTube's Letsplay Channel (bit.ly/2Q7kNRV). Is this type of video an innovation or does it recycle an old formula?