Media Institutions and Audiences: Key Concepts in Media Studies
by Nick Lacey
reviewed by Philip M. Napoli

Media Institutions and Audiences is the third in a series of books by Nick Lacey that grew out of a British Film Institute Report outlining the primary subject areas for media education (The other books in the series are Image and Representation [1998] and Narrative and Genre [2000]). Reflecting these origins, the book is aimed primarily at an undergraduate audience and would be of potential use for general media studies courses, or for courses that focus on media industries. Also reflective of the book’s origins, the analyses and examples in the text focus primarily on British media, though the book also contains case studies of multinational media conglomerates such as Viacom and NewsCorp, as well as an overview of Hollywood and its position in the global film marketplace.

The preface of the book begins with a quote from the British Film Institute’s report that inspired the book, which reads in part: “Common sense often leads to teaching about one medium at a time... placing emphasis solely on the characteristics of only one set of practices... which ignores the fact that all individuals experience media as a set of interrelated and interacting systems.” Generally, Lacey’s book does a solid job of putting this increasingly vital principal of both media education and media research into practice. In an environment of not only technological, but institutional convergence as well, analytical approaches that consider the media as a system rather than as discrete units are essential. Reflecting this perspective, Lacey draws upon a broad range of media to illustrate his points. However, if there is a greater emphasis on any particular medium, it is perhaps on the motion picture industry, no doubt a reflection of the author’s numerous prior publications in this area.

The book is organized into eight chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the media business, with a particular emphasis on the history and institutional dynamics of Hollywood and on the structure and strategies of contemporary media conglomerates such as Viacom and NewsCorp. Lacey provides a detailed examination of contemporary motion picture production and marketing strategies used to overcome the inherently high risk nature of the movie business. He also provides a detailed account of how media conglomerates attempt (often unsuccessfully) to create synergies across their various media product offerings.

The second chapter focuses on regulation and censorship, with an overview of British media content regulation as well as a discussion of common strategies of industry self-regulation. What is largely missing from this chapter, however, is a discussion of structural media regulation, even in terms of how such regulations might indirectly affect content.

The next three chapters (chapters three through five) focus on the analysis of media content in a variety of contexts.
(indeed, it is worth noting that textual analyses of a variety of sorts are a significant component of the book). Chapter three focuses on media texts as commodities. This chapter includes a useful discussion of media imperialism, with a detailed overview of American dominance of the international film marketplace, and a revealing analysis of how MTV developed into a global popular music powerhouse.

Chapter four focuses on marketing and public relations. Included in this chapter is a discussion of branding (an increasingly important concept for understanding the behaviors of media industries) and the growing advertising/PR machine that surrounds the introduction of new media products. Chapter five is of particular value in that it provides a rare focus on independent and alternative media and their place within the media system. Unfortunately, parts of this chapter get bogged down in highly detailed discussions of specialized musical genres and alternative music performers that may be too obscure for most readers. Nonetheless, this chapter is particularly useful for its exploration of how “independent” or “alternative” media products typically get integrated into the mainstream, often with an accompanying loss of artistic integrity.

The final three chapters focus on media audiences. The first of these chapters (chapter six) examines theories of media uses and effects (uses and gratifications theory receives a particularly in-depth overview), and provides a thorough discussion of how the entire history of media is one of each new media technology becoming the focus of widespread concerns over the corrupting influences of its content. Chapter seven focuses on how audiences typically are classified from a marketer’s standpoint. This chapter provides an illuminating discussion of the various demographic and lifestyle categories that marketers use to classify segments of the media audience. In reviewing this segment definitions and labels, this chapter provides some unsettling insights into the various stereotypes about media audiences that guide both advertiser and content provider decision-making. Chapter eight focuses on the political dimension of media audiences, with an emphasis on occurrences of political bias in the media.

Of particular value in these final three chapters is the contrast that Lacey provides between the priorities that arise from thinking about media audiences as consumers and the priorities that arise from thinking about media audiences as citizens. This issue is obviously a central concern in countries where media systems are in the process of moving away from government control toward more privatization. It is also an issue that should be much more prominent in the ongoing analysis of proper regulatory approaches in highly commercialized media systems, such as in the U.S., where the audience-as-consumer approach tends to dominate policy discussions.

Given the book’s strong grounding in cultural studies and textual analysis, it is perhaps not surprising that the more economics- and management-focused topics suggested by the book’s title are largely neglected. For instance, the book generally does not get into much detail on subjects such as the unique economic characteristics of media products or ratings-based theories of audience behavior (often characterized as “administrative” approaches to audience research). Nonetheless, the book serves as a useful primer for students and scholars seeking a basic understanding of the interaction between media organizations and the audiences they attempt to attract, as well as the broader political and cultural concerns that can arise from these interactions.

**Rating**

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**Rating Points:**

- excellent: ++++
- poor: +

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