

Questions of Scale, Structure, and Agency in Media Industries Research

“Infighting”

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I'd like to move from the specific to the abstract here by way of two recent, somewhat gossipy stories of contemporary media industry agency. The first is an authorial conflict: the process of finding a “consensus” cut for the recently released *Suicide Squad*, which the critical consensus found to be a mess of conflicting ideas. In other words, the form followed the process, detailed in a Hollywood Reporter expose, of the time pressure caused by an immutable deadline imposed by the Warner Brothers studio head, the choice of an unproven blockbuster director who producers might rein in, and as production spiraled out of control, an array of final cuts by different editors and backed by different factions. This included a version edited by the team that cut the trailer, which gained greater acclaim than the final film. Reporter Kim Masters described this process of tent pole production as typical, not exceptional.

The second story is an ideological conflict: public revelations of Roger Ailes' despicable behavior exposed an already simmering rift between Rupert Murdoch and his sons over Fox News. For the father, the network's right wing ideology had proven popular and extremely profitable; and implicitly, in the political economic sense, the network's rhetoric helped justify his own nepotistic conglomerate. For the brothers, the extreme rhetoric hampered NewsCorp's global brand, where an association with America's rabid and xenophobic conservatism risked its expansion into developing markets in Asia.

In both cases, what we have is infighting, a fundamental part of media industry production that is only exacerbated by the growing scale of conglomerates and the expansive reach of their products, from global blockbusters to an array of networks and delivery systems. And infighting, particularly multi-factional infighting, disrupts models of agency across the personal and corporate scales of media production. In *Production Cultures*, John Caldwell offers an expansive look at how both individual actors and individual firms, ranging from subcontractors to studios, assert and self-define their expertise, ownership, and agency over media productions. What I'm concerned with here is how these multi-level agents interact and I would argue, fail to reproduce the conflicts we most often stage in theoretical debates.

In film studies, we traditionally look at how the individual or individual firm asserts their independence against a somewhat monolithic industrial complex. We've come a long way from an auterism that posits the great individual artistically overcoming the conformity of Hollywood production. With an interest in less powerful agents, like below-the-line workers, and more practical forms of agency, like controlling distribution channels and deal-making, media industries research has expanded the field of agency. Yet in our arguments, we still often stage rather conventional warfare between the individual and the system. *Suicide Squad* suggests that contemporary blockbusters result from a multi-front struggle with conflicting agendas, where the current structure promotes internecine battles that prevent agency, coherence, or even an appreciation of the studio's most valuable intellectual

properties. We can dismiss these issues, like earlier scholars, as productions lacking an auteur director, producer, or even mogul. But then we miss the opportunity to comprehend how the Hollywood juggernaut, historically and currently, invariably loses its invisible agency to turn out profitable mass entertainment.

The Newscorp example suggests a similar issue in a top-down, political economic analysis, where owners assert their structural dominance across the media landscape, let alone their own company. This approach belies the powerful fiefdoms, like Ailes' unit, that while serving at the pleasure of the owners, function under their own ideological and quasi-professional standards. And like any empire, the scale and diversity of Newscorp's holdings exacerbate the difficulty in effectively managing each unit or preventing conflicts of interest and ideology between units.

Internal corporate conflicts rarely set one agent directly against another, like the legendary battle of wills between Irving Thalberg and Erich von Stroheim, the executive and the artist. Nor do they suggest a lack of individual agency. In both of these examples, the problem is arguably having too many powerful agents to produce a coherent film or a cohesive corporate image. Which is to say that media industries research has mapped out a wide range of actors and their potential role within the system. That gives us an opportunity to shake up the box, and see how these roles collide, and how media industries benefit and self-destruct from systemic infighting.