

Rethinking Labor Histories and Production Cultures in #MeToo and #TimesUp Hollywood

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Emerging from historical interests in both artists and the media industries, the subfield of production/industry studies has grown substantially within TV (and film) studies over the past two decades. Yet, despite the interventions of feminism, queer theory, and critical race studies, many scholars researching successful TV and other media professionals tend to unconsciously reproduce the myth of The Great Artist—that is, such individuals are born talented and thus require no training. As a result, studies of creative media producers have long overlooked the field of education as a primary site of such laborers' (re)production. Yes, many scholars focused on media “greats” attend to their influences by other Great Artists (John Wells by Steven Bochco, for example). But in doing so they suggest a form of self-training through fortunate but unplanned exposure and leave the prospects of conscious study and thus the realm of education unexamined. This approach makes some sense for scholars examining media professionals trained prior to the rise of film schools in the 1970s. But it makes little sense today, when such production programs are collectively the primary pipeline of talent into the culture industries. (Wells is a graduate of USC's School of Cinematic Arts.)

By avoiding discussions of where and how media professionals are trained, TV scholars interested in cultural production and the creative industries have lost an opportunity to investigate not only one of the primary structures contributing to formation of TV professionals, but also a major incubator for the patriarchy, misogyny, and other forms of xenophobia that have long infected the Hollywood industries. To date only a small handful of studies have examined the gender politics of film schools: Only three have been published since the 1980s, and only one has appeared in the past decade. (I know of none that focuses on the racial politics of film schools, nor any dealing with LGBTQ+ issues in such programs.) These figures are astonishing, especially given the increase in attention over the same period to sexism in professional media production. As a result of this lacuna, our field has no longitudinal data on student training and experiences in film schools (either quantitative or qualitative) from which we might build viable strategies for progressive intervention in both tertiary production programs and our media industries. And so these places of creative practice, if not critical thinking, are allowed to remain relatively unchanged despite notable progress in other academic institutions and labor fields.

But it's not just scholars who have this blindspot. A variety of professional organizations formed to assist women and racial minorities in Hollywood, such as the Geena Davis Institute, have also ignored film schools as a primary site in need of change. Part of the problem is that those organizations rely on studies by scholars like Martha Lauzen and

Stacy Smith, who focus quantitatively on the film and TV industries' hiring trends and ask no questions about where and how those laborers are trained.

My hope is that our roundtable will consider how the education of TV professionals impacts labor conditions within the media industries, and that we will encourage other media scholars interested in production/industry studies to redirect their gaze to this vastly understudied but key area. Some of the questions that need further analysis include: What is the gender and racial makeup of film school students? How do student enrollments change across film school curricula, from introductory to advanced classes? Who is teaching these students, and how are they supported administratively? Which media professionals are discussed as examples in production classes? Are gender and other categories of identity raised by instructors, and, if so, how? How do gender and race impact the construction of student production crews and their media labor?

These questions are focused on the present, but interviewing older media professionals about their film school experiences would also help us to understand better how change may have occurred (or not) in such settings. In turn, our field would benefit from more studies of media production programs in elementary and secondary schools, not to mention informal at-home training, since younger people today have greater access to media-making technologies than any previous generation, and socialization practices are perhaps even more significant earlier in life.

It is also my hope that more media production/industry scholars will develop effective interventions for film schools so we can help to ensure that women and other marginalized groups have equal opportunities for training, jobs, and advancement in the media industries. One amazing resource in this area is EDIT Media, which is coordinated by Jen Proctor (<http://www.editmedia.org/>) and was launched last year. What other interventions do we know of, and how might those initiatives impact labor conditions in our media industries?