

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

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Scholars studying production cultures are often intimidated by the prospect of researching powerful conglomerates in the media industries. We worry about the difficulties of accessing the intimate "behind-the-scenes" spaces that provide vital ethnographic insights about individual agency. Exemplary scholarship, like the work of John Caldwell and Vicki Mayer, excavate dazzling ethnographic insight into below-the-line workers, while few, if any, recent precedents exist for studying the big Hollywood studios. Practicality generally gravitates the field of production culture toward the study of smaller groups and institutions, while abandoning powerful organizations to the more theoretical, and often less grounded, realm of political economy.

I argue that production studies needs to raise its ambitions in terms of the types of companies we want to analyze, and that their gatekeeping cultures themselves deserve further analysis. Though seemingly impractical, my current research project aims to apply production cultures methodologies to Disney and Lucasfilm, two recently merged institutions that are notoriously secretive, litigious, and PR-centric. These experiences have shown me that, first, persistence can sometimes award us more access than we first expected, and second, that even denials of access themselves can help illuminate how these production cultures function.

Since moving to Los Angeles in 2010, I have approached studios several times for research projects, and most of the time, someone has readily agreed to an interview. Success in landing an interview, in my experience, tends to emerge from an obscure confluence of factors, with no single variable determining success or failure. Geographical proximity to the industry has aided serendipitous networking opportunities, and namedropping my institutional affiliation has never hurt. Sometimes the right opening drops in your lap, but more often you have to hunt for it.

For my current research project on the marketing and publicity campaign of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, I wanted to interview people working inside Disney and Lucasfilm's marketing teams. My own experience illustrates how opportunities for access can become clear when we are persistent in our searches. First, I went to a *Star Wars* convention in Southern California and bumped into a few people on my interview wish list. One was, thankfully, willing to speak with me informally, but all of them told me that any formal interview requests would have to be vetted by Lucasfilm and Disney Public Relations — a daunting prospect. Rather than cold-contacting the general PR email address I was given, I looked for a side door. I took from my research collection of news and magazine articles a rather comprehensive list of reporters with a history of covering Lucasfilm with some degree of access. One works at Entertainment Weekly — where one of my neighbors happens to work as well. I awkwardly asked for an introduction to the reporter, who then met me for an interview over lunch, and before it was over he had offered to vouch for me to his contacts at Lucasfilm and Disney. My carefully-worded interview request to the head of publicity at Disney was answered four minutes after it was sent: "We would be happy to." A productive phone interview ensued which opened the door for further contact.

It may seem that I stumbled into that access by pure coincidence, but in reality, any scholar with a degree of connection to media culture likely has numerous potential paths to access we could "coincidentally" stumble into, to bring us closer a degree at a time to our own figurative Kevin Bacons. Journalists can prove to be useful resources, especially for those who live outside of media industry cities, as our shared background as "knowledge class workers" can open up the kinds of peer-to-peer relationships Sherry Ortner calls "Studying Sideways."¹

¹ Sherry Ortner, "Studying Sideways," in *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, ed Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell. Routledge, 2009.

Now interviews can only get you so far, especially since experienced Public Relations executives specialize in restricting information at least as much as giving it out. On one hand, it's still unlikely that I'll ever be able to achieve the ideal level of access for participant observation at a big studio. On the other hand, I've come to realize that the boundaries to our access, and the structures of power that enforce them, themselves form an ethnographic contact zone deserving analysis. Public relations gatekeepers function to preserve the spectacle of "backstage" arenas — as embodied in endless "behind-the-scenes" texts of all kinds. In my current perspective, "behind-the-scenes" is less the closed-off real-world space behind studio gates I'll probably never visit, and more the textual discourse carefully cultivated by the publicity gatekeepers. Our own denials of access sit alongside a plethora of marketing and publicity texts as artifacts we can use to explore how studio marketing departments function, both institutionally and culturally.