INTRODUCTION

While television is used in many ways, for many purposes, in different contexts, there is no question but that one of the most pervasive uses is the dissemination of dramatic entertainment. For this reason, if for no other, we might be interested in the central question of this chapter—how does that “moment” of dramatic entertainment come to be? In spite of our general familiarity and ease with the medium, this aspect of television remains mysterious, for viewers and scholars alike. My own interest in this general area focuses on a specific question: what is the role of individual creativity in the context of mass art? One result of that interest was a collaborative effort with Robert S. Alley, a book-length study of prominent television producers (Newcomb and Alley, 1983). Our thesis, auteurist in tone, was that “strong” producers could manipulate this mass industrial system as much as they were manipulated by it. The thesis was substantiated with interviews and critical analysis.

In the study of television production, any such specific interest must be considered in light of other concerns, which can be reduced to broad conceptual terms. Most often, in a suspicious construction, the questions are summarized in this way: what options are made available to creators by an industrial system working in its own interests and the interests of dominant groups, and how do those options systematically constrain the production process? A more optimistic formulation can also be presented: given the recognition of these limitations by creators, how are they accepted, rejected, appropriated, or otherwise used in diverse ways?

To examine these broad topics, the generalized questions must be seen to contain others. What is the specific industrial process by which television drama production is currently organized? What are the roles
of specific points of influence such as writers, supervising producers, executive producers, directors, and actors? What influence is exerted by “external” forces such as networks, advertisers, special-interest groups, and regulatory agencies? What is the power of the “star” in shaping such a process? What is the role of “forms,” historically developed by interested parties, or “culturally given,” in shaping and maintaining content? What is the organization of labor within collaborative media industries, and how do professional guilds monitor, participate in, and manipulate that organization? What is the role of technological development in maintaining or changing that organization and in shaping content? Still other questions arise if we apply historical perspectives. How does current practice differ from that in earlier periods, especially in the transition from radio and film to television? Similarly, how has the process of making television been affected by competition from newer forms of media distribution such as video cassette and cable television? The purpose of this chapter is to explore ways of understanding these processes, asking these questions, and providing overviews related to other aspects of media study.

We can proceed by citing significant examples of prior work. That survey completed, I will attempt a synthesis of questions and approaches into principles (not theories with predictive value) that might guide similar research, and I close by outlining some specific, much-needed projects within this area of media studies.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Three models

Three significant studies demonstrate, in my view, differing approaches to some of these questions and can serve as models for further research. The first of these, an obligatory beginning point for any production research, is Philip Elliott’s *The Making of a Television Series* (1972). Even though Elliott deals with the making of a specific form of documentary (a series of programs designed for an adult-education project), many of the issues he deals with are central to our concerns. Indeed, in his conclusions, he attempts to generalize from his findings, and specifically assesses the utility of his work for examining the production processes of dramatic television. Elliott’s approach is also valid in studying broadcasting systems of very different sorts than his
own focus, Britain’s Independent Television Authority (ITA). His work can certainly be used as a basis for comparison, if not as a model, in studies that cross modes of organization, regulation, financing, and distribution.

One great strength of Elliott’s work lies in its detail. Perhaps because it was an early example of its kind, drawing as much from analysis of other social phenomena and from the sociology of art as from media theory or film analysis, the book walks us through each step in the production process. By tracing the series from its original conception, through a research and development phase, into production, postproduction, and broadcast, Elliott is able to examine the points of decision making. This enables him to identify critical conjunctures involving personnel, conceptual, technical, and aesthetic choice, division and organization of labor, and levels of authority. The chronology of the production process becomes the organizing principle of the book, a strategy common to much production research that follows.

The book is also highly self-conscious regarding its methods. Elliott places his approach in the context of prior versions of media study, pointing out strengths and weaknesses of his choices in relation to survey research and traditional sociology. The conclusion carefully draws lines of connection from the single case study to other possible versions of similar research, and the author considers the limitations and possibilities of participant observation in a special appendix to his work. I also discuss these and other methodological issues below with reference to a case study.

Moreover, Elliott is vitally concerned with linking his work to larger theoretical considerations within media studies. As in most such studies, it is clear that the theory does not grow inductively from the case study. Rather, the study is suffused with assumptions which are brought fully to the surface only in the conclusion.

The second book I see as a model for production research actually appeared before Elliott’s work. Muriel Cantor’s *The Hollywood Television Producer: his Work and his Audience* was first published in 1971, and reprinted, with a significant new introduction, in 1988. Cantor’s book, grounded in traditional occupational sociology, is based on tape-recorded interviews with fifty-nine television producers. These interviews are supplemented with public and private documents and with field observation of studios.
The values of this book are, for our purposes, many. First, it gives a precise picture of television work, through the perspective of a significant group, at a particular historical juncture. Second, directly related to this is a sense that this perspective is fully contextualized by a thorough knowledge of the television industry as a whole.

Third, the book’s focus on a particular occupational group serves as a model for much-needed work with other groups. No other study has provided comparable depth and breadth in discussing writers, directors, actors, or executives in the television industry.

Finally, Cantor’s work draws on a particular perspective of mass communication and individual creativity. Thus, the book reaches the general conclusion that creativity and autonomy are highly controlled, if not stifled. Television drama is seen as mainstream, maintaining the status quo despite potentially more progressive values among producers. This is attributed to the general profit motive of the American television industry, an industry central to capitalist ideology. Theories of culture in this work are not nearly so well developed as theories of society. The core of Cantor’s argument lies in what is, in my view, a limiting notion of “creativity” or “autonomy.” Still, it is the view held by many in the industry as well as by the scholars who study them.

Both these strengths and weaknesses inform the third major work in this group, Todd Gitlin’s Inside Prime Time (1983), which combines several aspects of the two previous models and adds significantly to both. Gitlin draws his conclusions from several hundred interviews and some observations of television production. His topics range from explanatory overviews of network research and industry ratings systems, to case studies of the production of particular television dramas. The book offers the multiple perspectives of professional participants rather than the sorted and reasoned descriptions of a participant-observer.

The descriptive portions take us through an apparent chaos, presenting the perspectives of writers, producers, actors, and production company and network executives. Conflict and contradiction are apparent throughout. The result is a more dynamic and fluctuating picture than that offered by either Elliott or Cantor. In comparison with Elliott, this difference may be seen to emerge from systemic (Hollywood vs ITA) and generic (dramatic entertainment vs instructional documentary) distinctions. Differences with Cantor emerge from distinctions in method. Gitlin includes detailed case
studies, examines and evaluates fictional content from a text-analytical perspective, and speaks with a wider range of individuals. Cantor’s emphasis on occupational sociology is replaced by an emphasis on the sociology of art, communication, and culture.

Ultimately, this complexity in the struggle over meaning and expression is seen as thoroughly meretricious. For Gitlin, television entertainment is a debased form of expression growing from, and contributing to, a social and political world already debased by consumer capitalism. The result in the television industry is a non-critical, indeed celebratory acceptance of “recombinative” art suggesting “cultural exhaustion” (Gitlin, 1983:325–35). This dark view leaves little hope for creators, who are described with obvious interest on Gitlin’s part, but with great irony. Nor does it hold out much value for audiences, who are described, despite a few disclaimers, disdainfully.

Comparisons of these three models in terms of focus and organization show us at least three ways of doing production research. The organizing principle of Elliott’s work, and of much research in this area, is the case study through time. It can be seen as a micro-level analysis, tracing the choices made, the points of power and influence, the negotiations, and the final product. Generalizations from such analyses are usually tentative and theory-driven, rather than clear empirical findings. Given the variety of productions and production techniques in television, many comparisons must be made before reaching actual conclusions.

The principle informing Cantor’s work is the role of the occupation in context. This study can be termed “mid-level.” Individual productions are cited; “stories” are told about negotiations. But because we see those cases from individual perspectives, it is only as they accumulate that an analytical perspective can be gained. Still, because most of these producers have worked on multiple projects, their experience is more wide-ranging than the history of single productions.

Gitlin operates primarily at the macro-level. His work opens with an overview of the television industry and closes with a generalized argument regarding contemporary American culture. He traces individual productions through time, as does Elliott, and he offers testimony of many individual perspectives from television professionals, thus amplifying Cantor. The evidence, however, is offered to support larger claims. Media study becomes a crucial example of a much broader analysis of culture, society, and politics,
so that much of what Gitlin suggests could be claimed in other contexts of education, religion, or social policy.

Other helpful studies

*Hazell: the Making of a TV Series* (1978), by Manuel Alvarado and Edward Buscombe, offers a rich parallel to Elliott’s work. The focus here is on a dramatic, limited-run series (miniseries) adapted from a detective novel. Alvarado and Buscombe were able to secure the cooperation of Thames Television and follow the entire development, production, and broadcasting history of the series.

*Doctor Who: the Unfolding Text* (1983), by John Tulloch and Manuel Alvarado, takes a different direction. Following the history of this long-running series, the authors discuss production decisions and philosophies within the context of a comprehensive cultural analysis of the program. The work is described as “an investigation in terms of the industrial, institutional, narrative, generic, professional and other practices which, originally existing outside the programme, have operated in different ways to shape it” (Tulloch and Alvarado, 1983:2). In many ways this book is a model for the sort of analysis called for in this chapter. Researchers seeking a model for a cultural studies approach rather than a more specific focus on production research will find this a powerful exemplar.

While these two books focus on television series, following Elliott’s lead and one direction of Gitlin’s analysis, Newcomb and Alley parallel Cantor in *The Producer’s Medium: Conversations with Creators of American TV* (1983). Our aim was to show that the television industry does not necessarily stifle creativity. The book presents condensed versions of interviews with eleven very successful producers, and links their own perspectives to our critical analysis of their work.

Joseph Turow’s *Playing Doctor: Television, Storytelling, and Medical Power* (1989) offers a thorough version of production research on television drama. His concern is with representations of medical professionals and the institution of medicine. The focus is on the circuits of power uniting television, the institution of medicine, and the viewing public. Few studies deal with the production of specific content areas, and this is a good example.

Many studies of production processes have also been captured in careful essay-length studies. Judine Mayerle’s (1989) study of *Newhart* guides the reader through the entire production process by examining
the production and postproduction of a single episode. It does not, however, deal extensively with the process of constant rewriting that is necessary in television comedy. Another article does tackle this issue. Jimmie L. Reeves’ (1988) study of Newhart is based on access to all versions of a single script from the freelance writers’ first “pitch” notes through the finally edited and aired version. Taken together, these two articles provide the rich detail which is necessary to understand the production of episodic television.

In addition, scholars interested in production research will find extraordinary help in material often overlooked from an academic perspective. These sources appear as memoirs, fans’ books, instructional and informational material, journalistic overviews of business and industry, and so on. For example, important “instructional” information is offered by Blum and Lindheim (1987), Chambers (1986), and Shanks (1976; 1986). Descriptions of “backstage” events and practices, sometimes accompanied by “insider accounts,” are offered by Broughton (1986), Christensen and Stauth (1984), Floyd (1988), Hill and Weingrad (1986), Lynch (1973), and Ravage (1978). Useful insider accounts and memoirs are presented by Levinson and Link (1981; 1986) and Metz (1975). Overviews of various aspects of the television industry are available in Eliot (1983), Mair (1988), and Morgenstern (1979). And case studies of the making of specific programs are offered by Pekurny (1980) and Ravage (1977). Many more examples of this work are available, and are often more accessible in public libraries than in academic research collections.

METHODS AND ISSUES

Preliminaries

Qualitative research is often dependent on factors not fully controlled by the researcher. The first of these is access. At times, opportunity, rather than logic, guides the work. Many researchers, however, are surprised at the ease with which they can gain access to those involved in high-level media production. All the common courtesy protocols—preliminary letters and telephone calls outlining specific needs, dates, times, and references—must, of course, be observed. Once a relationship has been established with one individual or group, access develops out of recommendation, reference and trust. Media professionals are quick to realize the researcher’s needs and to offer
suggestions and introductions of other persons who can act as sources. Thus, access is constantly renegotiated during the course of research. Somewhat more disconcerting, at times, is a deeper form of renegotiation required when the researcher realizes that additional access and new information are redefining the entire project.

Access is also enhanced by specific knowledge of professional, organizational, and technical matters. Professionals do not have time or opportunity, for the most part, to teach researchers. They will be able to provide information about specific technical matters, work routines, and individual practices, but the researcher must have a high level of specific knowledge “going in.”

Access is made easier, finally, by careful attention to timing. Most media industries have routinized work procedures that range from seasonal emphases to daily schedules. Researchers must be aware of the best time of the year, the week, and the day to reach media professionals. They must also be prepared for meeting times to be shifted at the last moment, and to see this as a necessary part of their work, not an attempt on the part of their subjects to avoid them.

Methods

The two primary methods of production research are participant observation and interviewing. Each has strengths and limitations, discussed particularly cogently by Elliott (1972). I add my own perspective here.

The strengths of participant observation are rooted in its actual, “on the ground” observation of process. Researchers are able to observe actual work routines, in the course of the observation recording decision-making processes, conflict, negotiation, and compromise, all of which are part of the production process at different levels. Key to analysing the processes of production are observations of the exercise of power. In negotiation, who and what control the driving forces that enable conflicts to be resolved? Observation can also be made of the final outcome of this process, the application of decisions. This may lead to discussions of successes and failures, as production personnel see the results of their actions and choices even while the researcher sees the results of her or his work. The greatest opportunity of participant observation, then, is the constant refinement of questions, goals, and directions as the work continues.
The degree of success in participant observation is related, in some cases, to the level of participation. In this regard, the more knowledgeable researcher has advantages. If the researcher knows little or nothing of the technical processes involved, observations will be limited, narrowly directed, or simply incorrect. Again, there is little time for learning “on the job.”

The primary disadvantages of participant observation are frequently rooted in limited access. Dependence on the goodwill of host institutions or individuals may result in too easy acceptance of their point of view. Participant observation is also limited to the duration of the researcher’s access, and it is difficult to generalize from “snapshot” experiences. This is doubly the case when the observer is considered an intruder and treated with suspicion. All these matters rest, finally, in another: whether the presence of the observer alters the normal procedures one wishes to observe. Since “invisibility” is impossible, the only recourse is, again, extensive and varied background information.

The primary strength of interviewing as a method is its capacity to range over multiple perspectives on a given topic. Multiple interviews can be used to increase information and broaden a point of view. All interviews can be used as heuristic devices, as new information leads to new perspectives and questions for later subjects. Interview data further facilitate the gathering of historical perspectives. Subjects have usually been involved in many projects, often for many years. They thus are able to point to changes caused by technological, financial, or regulatory factors. In this way, they actually do some of the researcher’s comparative work; one of the pleasures of interviewing is to discover how analytically aware practitioners are.

All these factors lead to what is perhaps the interview technique’s greatest strength—the gathering of more comprehensive information than might be possible in participant observation. Because even the most rigid interview schedule can be altered in process, the researcher is free to follow leads and expand questions. The more extensive, or more precise, questions can lead to more detailed responses, more leads to other subjects, more opportunities for comparison, and even a thorough revision of the entire project.

Eventually, the researcher must confront the most formidable issue of interview work—the reliability of informants. While the participant observer might be faced with her or his own versions of this issue, on-the-scene activity provides some check on the explanations given.
After-the-fact descriptions offered in interviews must be examined very carefully for everything from accuracy of detail to basic truthfulness. Related problems include a tendency to ask for information that will confirm the researcher’s own assumptions; the realization that the informant has a “canned” response to many familiar questions; the less likely discovery of intentional deception; and the more likely recognition of self-serving answers to questions.

Using either of these primary methods for research on the production of television drama demands constant cross-checking and amplification with other methods and sources. In the ideal situation, participant observation and interview will be used together. Furthermore, interpretations must be supported with reference to several types of explanatory frameworks. I consider these below in terms of the historical, economic, technological, textual, and organizational issues involved in production research.

Issues

Any production research must consider questions in at least five major categories: cultural, institutional, organizational, group, and individual. At the risk of making a sometimes chaotic process much too rational and rigid, we can consider a checklist of sorts which may remind us of significant factors in production research.

In dealing with television drama, it is incumbent on us to have some theory of how drama, particularly popular entertainment, works in culture, of drama’s role historically and in the new mass-mediated context, and of the ways in which audiences attend to it. Television’s relation to other forms of expression, histories of genre, theories of narrative and of textual analysis, will shape both the questions and observations of researchers. Television drama may be a “product,” but it is a product with special cultural uses. The “culture industries” thus are different in significant ways from other industries, no matter how similar in other ways.

As is always the case, these special features are affected by institutional arrangements. Production research must account for macro-level arrangements such as whether a television system is defined as public service or commercial, the policies and economic structures supporting each type, and the relevant agents of power at these various levels. A study of television drama production for the Public Broadcasting Service in the USA, for example, will focus on
different issues than a study examining commercial network television, even while inevitably asking many of the same questions.

Within these institutions, organizational structures impinge directly on the production of drama. For example, I have used the term “drama” throughout to refer to fictional, dramatic programming on television. Within the commercial networks, however, there are formal Divisions of Drama (referring to one-hour programming in the action-adventure and melodrama forms), Comedy (referring to half-hour programming, usually, but not always comic in nature), and Long Form (referring to made-for-television movies and miniseries). Day-time and Prime-time are also separated formally, and Children’s programming is yet another division. Departments focused on Development are distinct from those dealing with Current programming. Financial, contractual, and personal matters are treated similarly in some ways, differently in others in all these areas. Moreover, organizational questions can also be specific to the level of production of individual series.

Groups within each of these organizations establish particular work routines which accomplish actual production. Often these groups are regulated contractually by unions or guilds that monitor their relations with other groups, with work demands, pay scales, and so on.

Finally, individuals make choices within all these contexts, modifying, accepting, rejecting, subverting, circumventing, and creating. Their work, in a highly collaborative, regulated, constrained context, ultimately contributes the elements of television drama.

A CASE STUDY

With these issues in mind, I will present as an example the project I am now beginning, titled “Writing/television: creativity in an industrial setting.” The project focuses on the work of writers for prime-time, series television, and while the title suggests a sociological perspective, my main concerns are aesthetic and cultural. In fact, “creativity” may be the wrong term here, for I am actually more interested in “authorship.”

I am interested in this topic for several reasons. I am intrigued by the problem of how one writes for a set of characters one did not invent, within genres one did not inflect. I am even more concerned with the narrative structures of series television, in which long-term
narratives are planned, for financial purposes, not to end. Put another way, since series television violates formal Aristotelian notions of beginning, middle, and end, how does one write for a “perpetual middle,” or a perpetual second act, especially when episodes do often conform to traditional principles? Given the historical and narrative focus of these questions, I place them in the cultural arena.

I am acutely aware, however, of the institutional constraints on television writers, beginning with the difficulty of breaking into this position, and of the various levels of control that exceed the traditional notion of authorship as an individual autonomous voice. Certain legal rules apply at this level. The Writers Guild Minimum Basic Agreement with producers mandates, for example, that at least two episodes of every series be given to freelancers, writers not on staff. I will be particularly concerned with how writers perceive their role within these institutional contexts and with how they perceive those roles to have changed.

The same issues will be addressed at the organizational level in a more immediate way. Television writers are constantly rewritten by other writers who have more autonomy within the organization. I am especially interested in how writing and rewriting differ between comic and dramatic productions, within the context of specific shows (personalities and professional styles come into play here), and at different studios and production companies.

At the group level, I am interested in the writers’ collective perceptions. The study will focus on the different perceptions of comedy and drama writers, freelancers and staff, new and old, successful and unsuccessful writers, and so on. The history of the Writers Guild, of various negotiations and strikes, will be pertinent here, as well, as is the choice of many successful writers to become “hyphenates,” producer-writers who create new shows, hire writers, and supervise their work. This topic is especially important in the current state of the American television industry, where successful writers, particularly comedy writers, have become exceptionally powerful, commanding multi-year, multimillion-dollar studio contracts. Finally, of course, I am interested in how an individual writer accomplishes his or her daily work in this complex context.

I will use both participant observation and interviews to gather data for this study. Because I have written for series television and continue to work in that arena, I know most of the basic rules of the game. I also have extensive access to writers and writer-producers.
As a member of the Writers Guild, I have access to contractual documents, Guild officials, and computer bulletin boards to communicate with other writers. Because many writers and producers go on to network positions, I also have access to network officials who deal with writers.

Once the interviews and observations have been collected, however, the work of the production researcher has just begun. Any researcher in this area is faced with more material than can be used. To sort and cull the material, the researcher must draw conclusions that are not obvious in the data, search for patterns of significance, and apply those patterns to previous research. (For details of analytical procedures, see Chapter 1 on discourse analysis, and Chapter 2 on the research process.) This is so despite the fact that production research appears to be more empirically grounded than other forms of interpretation.

It should be clear by now that the simple question posed at the beginning of this chapter—how does an episode of television drama come to be broadcast?—is woefully inadequate as a guide for this interpretive process. At best, the question is a microcosmic example of these larger issues, so that the individual episode can be seen as a point of conjunction where the issues and the forces behind them meet. But it is with the macrocosmic scale that we must end. Production research, then, is conducted not merely to describe interesting examples of one of the most prevalent forms of communication in today’s world. It will also be shaped by researchers’ assumptions regarding issues such as “art” and “communication,” “society” and “culture,” “high art,” “popular culture,” “mass communication,” and “the audience.”

We can see these issues most clearly by returning briefly to our primary examples of previous research. All three authors assume that television, as constituted in specific industrial settings, fails to reach its progressive ideological potential. (Underlying some of these assumptions is another which suggests that television is incapable of reaching that potential.) For Elliott, the problem lies in the inherently contradictory notion of “mass” communication. For Cantor, the issue rests in the appropriation of the medium by those who would use it solely for profit, must therefore depend on the mass audience, and consequently must mold content in the most acceptable fashion, stifling individual creativity in the process. For Gitlin, the problems are the same, but even more fundamental: commercial television, creature of
What is (New) Media Art and (New) Media, Through the Lens of the IMMA Collection - Maeve Connolly

Further Reading
Glossary of terms (New) Media Art
Resources. page 03 page 04. page 08 page 16 page 17 page 20.

As the national cultural institution responsible for the collection and presentation of Modern and Contemporary Art, the Irish Museum of Modern Art exhibits artworks by established and emerging artists who use media ranging from painting and sculpture to installation, photography, video and performance.