Global Transformations in Media and Communication Research

Advancing Media Production Research

Shifting Sites, Methods, and Politics

Edited by Chris Paterson, David Lee, Anamik Saha and Anna Zoellner

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Advancing Media Production Research

Global Transformations in Media and Communication Research

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Advancing Media Production Research

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Edited by

Chris Paterson
University of Leeds, UK

David Lee
University of Leeds, UK

Anamik Saha
Goldsmiths, University of London

and

Anna Zoellner
University of Leeds, UK

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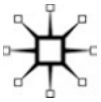

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Acknowledgements

This book arises from a one-day conference amongst scholars with an interest in improving our understanding of how the products of information and culture are created: 'Advancing Media Production Research' was simultaneously an International Association of Media and Communication Researchers (IAMCR) pre-conference and an International Communication Association (ICA) post-conference, conceived to take advantage of a unique opportunity to tap the expertise of well over a thousand media scholars from around the world who had converged on the British Isles in the summer of 2013 to attend one or both of the conferences of those associations (ICA in London, IAMCR in Dublin).

The event was sandwiched between those large conferences and drew about 60 scholars to the University of Leeds. It was initiated and co-sponsored by the IAMCR Media Production Analysis Working Group along with the Journalism Studies section of the ICA and the Media Industries and Cultural Production Working Group of ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association) – yielding an unprecedented international and inter-associational collaboration. The event was organized primarily by editors Chris Paterson, Anamik Saha, and David Lee, along with University of Leeds Institute for Communication Studies (now School of Media and Communication) colleagues Toussaint Nothias, Daniel Mutibwa, and research administrator Liz Pollard.

It is suitable, then, for this book to be published as part of the IAMCR's series 'Global Transformations in Media and Communication Research', launched in 2014, and this anthology is an important milestone in over 15 years of IAMCR facilitated scholarship combining that organization's history of critical, and very international, scholarship with advocacy of direct, exhaustive, and rigorous researcher engagement with complex and fast-changing media production environments, as is manifest in work of the Media Production Analysis Working Group.

Prominent scholars from around the world who participated in that conference included C.W. Anderson, Georgina Born, Tim Havens, Dave Hesmondhalgh, Philip Schlesinger, and Ida Willig, and we are pleased that some of them are represented in this volume. While most of the

chapters here were presented in an earlier form at our conference, a few have been generously authored by other researchers on our invitation. The editors are especially grateful for those efforts. Finally, thanks are due to IAMCR series co-editors Marjan de Bruin and Claudia Padovani for their considerable work in developing and coordinating this important collaboration with Palgrave Macmillan.

Notes on Contributors

Ana Alacovska is an assistant professor at Copenhagen Business School. Under the auspices of the Danish Council for Independent Research – the Humanities, she is conducting a post-doc study of the production of Scandinavian crime fiction in the Danish publishing industry. She is also the leader of a research project on post-socialist creative labour funded by the Swiss Development Agency. Her doctoral work on the production of travel guidebooks appeared in the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Communication, Culture & Critique* and *The Sociological Review/Sociological Review Monograph*.

C.W. Anderson is an associate professor at the College of Staten Island, CUNY. He is the author of *Rebuilding the News: Metropolitan Journalism in the Digital Age*, and the forthcoming *Journalism and News: What Everyone Needs to Know*, with Len Downie and Michael Schudson. His project takes a historical look at the use of data in news from the 1910s until the present.

Daniel A. Berkowitz is Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa, USA. His research involves the study of news cultures, news production and news texts through the lens of media memory, mythical narrative and boundary work. He is the editor of two books in those areas: *Social Meanings of News* and *Cultural Meanings of News*.

Hanne Bruun is Associate Professor and Head of the Research Programme Media and Communication in the Department of Media and Journalism Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her research areas are the aesthetics of television and its genres with a focus on journalism and entertainment, media history, audience studies and production studies. She is the author of seven books (in Danish), the latest being *Danish Television Satire: Entertainment with an Edge* (2011). She has contributed to several books and journals, including *International Journal of Digital Television*, *European Journal of Communication* and *Nordicom Information*.

Elina Erzikova is Associate Professor of Public Relations in the Department of Journalism at Central Michigan University. She holds a PhD in Mass Communications from the University of Alabama. A

former newspaper editor, Erzikova researches the post-Soviet Russian mass media system and the role of power in relationships between media and government.

Astrid Gynnild is Professor of Journalism and Media Studies and Chair of the Journalism Program in the Department of Information Science and Media Studies at the University of Bergen, Norway. Gynnild has authored a number of international articles and books at the crossroads of technology and online journalism. Her recent works focus on visual technologies and innovative dimensions of journalism. Gynnild has generated several grounded theories and is the editor of the multidisciplinary journal *Grounded Theory Review*. She is also co-author of *Grounded Theory: The Philosophy, Method and Work of Barney Glaser*.

David Lee is Lecturer in Cultural Industries and Communication in the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds. He is the author of a number of articles and chapters on creative work, cultural policy, copyright and television studies in international journals including the *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *Cultural Trends*, *Media, Culture & Society*, and *Television & New Media*. He is the co-author of *Culture, Economy and Politics: The Case of New Labour* (along with David Hesmondhalgh, Kate Oakley and Melissa Nisbett), published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2015. Before working in academia, David worked in documentary production at the BBC on series such as *Newsnight, Panorama* and *The Money Programme*.

Frederik Lesage is an assistant professor in the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University (SFU). His research interests involve applying mediation theory to an analysis of how consumer-oriented digital media are designed and used. His research has appeared in international journals including *Leonardo*, *Digital Creativity*, *Journal of Broadcasting* and *Electronic Media and Convergence*.

Zhengjia Liu is a PhD graduate from the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa and works as a marketing communications professional in a multinational high-tech corporation. Her main research interests focus on field and constructionist approaches to the study of social media from a cultural perspective. Some of her recent articles appeared in *Journalism: Theory, Practice and Criticism, International Journal of Sports Communication* and *Journal of Magazine and New Media Research*.

Wilson Lowrey is Professor and Chair of the Journalism Department at the University of Alabama. His scholarship focuses on media sociology. He is co-editor of *Changing the News: The Forces Shaping Journalism in Uncertain Times*, and his research has appeared in a number of academic journals, including *Journalism*, *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, *Journalism Studies*, *Political Communication* and *International Communication Gazette*.

Michael B. Munnik is Lecturer in Social Science Theories and Methods at Cardiff University. He completed his doctorate at the University of Edinburgh, after an MA in Religion in Contemporary Society from King's College London. Prior to undertaking postgraduate study, he worked for eight years as a journalist with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in Ottawa, Canada. His research concerns journalist–source relations, Muslims in Britain, and the role of religion in the public sphere.

Chris Paterson is Senior Lecturer in International Communication in the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds. He originated and co-edited, with David Domingo, two volumes of *Making Online News* (2007, 2011) and is the founder of the IAMCR working group on media production analysis. He authored *The International Television News Agencies* (2011) and *War Reporters under Threat: The United States and Media Freedom* (2014). His research encompasses international journalism, communication for development, and news production.

Daniel Perrin is Professor of Media Linguistics, Director of the Institute of Applied Media Studies (IAM) of the Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Winterthur; Vice President of the International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA); and co-editor of the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* and the De Gruyter Mouton *Handbooks of Applied Linguistics* series. His main areas of research and teaching are text linguistics, media linguistics, methodology of applied linguistics, text production research, and analysis of language use in the media and in professional communication. Daniel worked as a journalist and writing coach before his academic career and is still engaged in training and coaching media and communication professionals.

David M. Ryfe is Professor and Director of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Iowa. He has written widely in the areas of public deliberation, political communication, and the history and sociology of news. His most recent book, *Can Journalism Survive?* (2012), represents the most intensive ethnographic study of

newsrooms in a generation. His current work examines the growth of online news sites in regions across the United States.

Anamik Saha is a lecturer in the Department of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. His research interests are in race and the cultural industries. His work has appeared in journals including *Media, Culture & Society*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* and *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. Most recently he has edited a special issue of *Popular Communication* with David Hesmondhalgh on race and ethnicity in cultural production.

Willemien Sanders is an assistant professor at the Institute for Cultural Inquiry (ICON) and the Department of Media and Culture Studies at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. In her thesis, 'Participatory Spaces' (2012), she investigates documentary filmmaking ethics. Her research interests include documentary film, production studies and digital media studies. She is involved in EUscreenXL (www.euscreen.eu) and in SiFTI (www.sifti.no).

Philip Schlesinger is Inaugural Chair in Cultural Policy at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK and Deputy Director of CREATe, the UK Research Councils' Centre for Copyright and New Business Models in the Creative Economy. He is researching cultural crisis in Europe and is also working on a study of contemporary British film policy. His most recent, co-authored, books are *The Rise and Fall of the UK Film Council* (2015) and *Curators of Cultural Enterprise* (2015).

Tore Slaatta is a professor in the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Oslo, working on cultural theory, media and art sociology and production studies. He is Director of the NRC project *Art! Power: Orders and Borders in Contemporary Art in Norway* (2012–2015) and engages in research on literature, international publishing and European cultural policies. He translated two books by Pierre Bourdieu into Norwegian in 2007 and was a visiting professor at MSH/CNRS in Paris in 2006.

Ida Willig is Professor of Journalism Studies at Roskilde University, Denmark. Her research interests include journalistic practices, norms and values, media systems, press history and reflexive sociology. Her current projects focus on media pluralism and journalistic quality (using a mixed-methods approach of content analysis, survey and policy study of Danish news media).

Anna Zoellner is Lecturer in Media Industries at the University of Leeds with a professional background in documentary production. Her research interests are the intersection of media industries, media production studies, cultural labour research, and television studies with a methodological interest in ethnography and internationally comparative research. Her work has appeared in a number of edited volumes and journals including *Mass Communication and Society*, *Journal for the Study of British Cultures* and *Journal of Media Practice*.

Part I
Debates and Transitions

1

Production Research: Continuity and Transformation

Chris Paterson, David Lee, Anamik Saha, and Anna Zoellner

At the heart of this book is the question: how well do we understand the institutions which create our media, our information, and our culture? Rather than seeking to reveal the substantially hidden world of cultural production (as many works cited in this introductory chapter do well), this anthology explores many of the contemporary challenges to understanding the nature of cultural production – considering the research process, rather than research findings. By doing so, we hope to encourage researchers to push the boundaries of production research beyond the traditional (but still very necessary) 'newsroom observation' in order to expand production research across boundaries of genre and medium, to liberally borrow theory and method across previously rigid disciplinary borders, and to confront new challenges which threaten to insulate the creation of media and culture from rigorous independent examination.

Notwithstanding the strong (and justified) continuities in media production studies, research has changed radically since the early formative ethnographic and qualitative studies of the field in the 1970s and 1980s. The growing number of media and communication scholars interested in studying the everyday production of media texts are visible in the growth of related publications, specialized conferences and the establishment of association subgroups such as the International Association of Media and Communication Researchers (IAMCR) working group for Media Production Analysis (established in 1999) and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA) working group Media Industries and Cultural Production (established in 2011).

One cause of an expansion in media production research is the development of the media industries themselves. Research agendas and methodologies have been shaped by recent transformations of the

media landscape and production practice, exploring new research questions, sites and methodologies. And as the internal workings of media institutions change beyond the recognition of an earlier generation of researchers, and challenges to understand those internal functions become ever greater, there is a need to review what new knowledge is emerging from production research, what gaps remain, what challenges to production research persist, and to debate how those might be overcome. Our hope is to take an international and interdisciplinary approach to exploring in-depth research into processes of cultural production (whether through classically ethnographic immersion or other means) across a wide range of genres and forms of cultural institution, from funding bodies to television public affairs to newspaper journalism.

Early production studies and the development of a 'field'

Formative research carried out in the 1970s inside US national television news organizations (Gans, 1979; Epstein, 1974; Tuchman, 1978; Altheide, 1976), alongside work undertaken in the UK (Blumler, 1969; Elliott, 1972; Golding and Elliot, 1979), was crucial in establishing ethnographically informed media sociology as a tradition within media and communications research. As Schlesinger argues in this book, media sociology was comprised of a handful of scholars at this period, and this early research was deeply influential for an emerging generation of UK scholars who were also largely focusing on the production of news (Blumler, 1969; Elliott, 1972; Schlesinger, 1978; Golding and Elliot, 1979) as well as research on crime reporting and source relationships (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994), 'competitor-colleagues' in news production (Tunstall, 1971), television production (Elliot, 1972) and media organizational culture more generally (Burns, 1977).

This work is now sometimes referred to somewhat problematically as the 'first wave' of media sociology (Cottle, 2000; Willig, 2013), with contemporary researchers keen to stress the differences (organizationally, theoretically and methodologically) between this work and contemporary variations undertaken in a different context. There are significant differences. Much of the work cited above focuses on singular news organizations within highly unionized and relatively stable fields of employment. 'Precarity', 'multi-tasking', 'insecurity', and 'self-exploitation', all of which have become staple touchstones for contemporary accounts of media production (Banks, 2007; Gill and Pratt, 2008), are absent from these accounts, which focus on the bureaucratic routines of news

organizations (questions of decision-making, news judgements, source relationships) as well as questions of power, influence and ideology. Claims of truth, objectivity and impartiality were deconstructed and critically analysed by this generation of researchers.

Research dealing with media production today must address a field transformed by digital technology as well as the proliferation and fragmentation of creative production roles (Deuze, 2007), a marked shift in the speed of production (what McRobbie (2002a) has termed 'speeded up creative worlds'), and the impact of social media and so-called 'citizen' originated news production (Allan, 2013). As Schlesinger will also suggest in Chapter 2, we increasingly must undertake research in an environment shaped by the global discourse of the 'creative economy' as well as in the context of 'research impact', with the obligations to show relevance that come with research council funding.

While it is important to recognize the significant differences between media production research historically and today, we must also recognize the continuities. Challenges to such research abound and are escalating, ranging from increasingly secretive corporate cultures which see little value in inviting observation of their work, to pressure on scholars to produce more with less – leading to faster and easier modes of research. Full-scale immersive ethnographies are still relatively rare and tend to be undertaken by PhD researchers, due to their resource-intensive nature (however, brief ethnographic immersion has become far more common, as Ryfe maintains in Chapter 3). Access is still a vital issue, due to the ongoing need to deal with and convince gatekeepers to media organizations, although researchers are far more visible now than before in terms of their research profiles and writing being available online.

As noted by Schlesinger (1980) and others, the process of gaining the access to conduct long-term observational research within media organizations is usually challenging, and that access, when granted, can be tenuous. Paterson (2011: xi) observed in the introduction to his partially ethnographic study of (previously almost entirely unresearched) television news agencies, a longstanding obstacle to genuinely ethnographic production research 'is that organizations risk criticism when they permit independent analysis of what they do: what makes sense in the context of their business may look irresponsible or arrogant to people outside of that context.' Suspicion and caution about the purpose of media production research from inside media organizations continues to be a problematic issue for researchers. In Chapter 10, Munnik explores how recent events such as the Jimmy Savile and newspaper phone-hacking scandals in the UK have made access even more difficult than

before. At the same time, we have seen an explosion in recent decades in forms of cultural production, making the object of analysis ever harder to identify. Some of the authors in this volume challenge us to expand our conceptions of cultural production along with our methodological repertoire, as with Lesage's examination of software in our final chapter. And there is a continued focus in production research on media power and interactions between journalists, governments, lobbyists and public relations workers as well as consideration of how news is funded and influenced. As much of the work in this anthology demonstrates, questions of power, access and observation remain as vital today as they were in the 1970s and 1980s.

The transformation of the media industries

In the last decades media production has raised the interest of investors and policy-makers for its economic potential, supported by a general turn towards neo-liberalism. Deregulation and the promotion of the 'creative industries'[1] as sources of new revenue have driven policy initiatives – not only in the Western world (see Hesmondhalgh, 2013). The subsequent growth of media organizations followed by centralization and integration created a media ecology consisting of both large multinational media corporations and small-scale, even DIY, media production. Substantial competitive pressure and commodification of media texts characterize this environment and validate the continuity of classic production study questions about the influence of commerce, power and the role of creativity. In addition to such important continuities, industry transformations since the 1990s/2000s have also broadened the subjects of production research and widened the methodological canon of the field, supporting necessary shifts towards multinational, multi-sited and multi-method research to explore these developments. Media production research has spread beyond its traditional focus on news and television production, studying other forms of media and cultural production including popular culture and entertainment in diverse media industries such as music, publishing and new media. Furthermore, the investigation has been extended beyond the work of primarily creative media personnel to include workers 'below the line' (e.g. Mayer, 2011).

Research examining media production as an occupation has expanded rapidly in the last twenty years, stimulated to some degree by the optimistic policy discourse surrounding creative work as well as the growth and the flexibilization of the workforce. Critical cultural labour research

explores, amongst other things, the consequences of the casualization of employment, the nature of creativity, and the division of work roles as well as questions of ethics and diversity in media production. A growing body of literature on media work provides in-depth discussions of these matters both from a sociological and cultural studies perspective (e.g. Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Banks et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2014). This scholarship provides us with important insights into media producers' experience, yet methodologically such research relies mainly on the traditional interview, and to some degree, observation. Although we do not explicitly focus on labour in this volume, the chapters by Sanders, Perrin and Alacovska suggest alternative approaches to expand our understanding of what media workers do.

Whilst our knowledge of labour conditions continues to grow, production research related to digital technologies is still nascent. The substantial technological developments of recent decades (most notably digitalization), the emergence of the Internet, and the related convergence of texts and media devices, have deeply affected media production. This includes the emergence of new forms of media and communication including, for example, social media, online blogs/vlogs, and interactive virtual books, but it also adds another dimension to the production of 'traditional' media texts. Important work has been undertaken especially within journalism production research as scholars investigated the particularities of online news production (e.g. Paterson and Domingo, 2008; Domingo and Paterson, 2011). Other studies have focused on multiplatform production, interactive media texts and the virtual world of CGI (e.g. Bennett et al., 2012; Sorenson, 2012; Nash, 2012). However, further research is needed to explore the role of technologies in media production including, for example, the influence of grassroots production, participatory and collaborative production, the impact of social media, as well as the use of production software and hardware as suggested in Lesage and Perrin's chapters.

The expansion of media production as a business sector combined with technological development has made transnational media production and distribution more important for media producers. The media are both shaping and are being shaped by economic, political and cultural globalization; and scholarship needs to investigate the international connections, processes and influences of media production. Production research – partially due to its resource-intensive nature and its reliance on case studies – so far tends to focus on single national settings. Particular cultural or geographical sites certainly remain of high importance for media production research, as does domestic production for

media producers, but the movement of labour (and therefore skills but also cultural consciousness), finance (including certain forms of subsidies), and goods (especially the easily reproducible, immaterial media texts) across national borders is of great significance for the nature and production processes of media texts.

Research has been carried out especially in the study of international media distribution as well as the global trade and local adaptation of media texts (e.g. Steemers, 2004; Moran, 2006). Increasingly, there is also interest in contemporary transnational collaboration and runaway productions especially in the film industry. Yet, multiple international research sites and comparative research designs, such as discussed in Chapter 6 by Lowrey and Erzikova, are still a rare occurrence. More work is needed to explore the international dimensions of media production in more detail and, in the course of this, to question concepts of national culture and identity.

Cultural studies of production

There has also been a significant shift in theoretical focus within (some) production research. Influential research on contemporary media production has drawn extensively on a range of social theories, in particular those that focus on the shaping of the self within late modernity (McRobbie, 2002b; Ursell, 2000; Gill, 2011). This has led to attention being paid to the subjective experiences of cultural workers, with concepts such as emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003), governmentality (McRobbie, 2002b) and moral economy (Hesmondhalgh, 2011) coming to the fore as tools for understanding media production within a new context.

In addition, a relatively new field of research (particularly in the US) has emerged that draws more explicitly from cultural studies. Cultural studies has generally been seen as interested primarily in texts and audiences, but as Havens (2014) points out there is a history, albeit an unrecognized one, of cultural studies that are more interested in media and cultural production (see Williams, 1973; Frith; 1981; Gitlin, 1983; Negus, 1992; D'Acci, 1994). Nonetheless, in recent times we have seen a renewed interest by cultural studies scholars in media production (predominantly focused on entertainment and popular culture). This new surge of research operates under several names including production studies (Mayer et al., 2009), critical media industry studies (Havens et al., 2009), and creative industries (Hartley, 2005). While they apply different labels, they each can broadly be described as cultural studies of media production.

Cultural studies approaches to media production share three main characteristics. Firstly, they emphasize their basis in critical scholarship – often in distinction to the more descriptive and neutral tone of the organizational sociology that characterizes production of culture studies (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Thus these accounts are grounded in questions of power; that is, how cultural producers inhabit and exercise it. Secondly, they are interested in the 'cultures of production' (Negus, 1997), or as Meyer et al. (2009: 2) put it, 'production as culture'. Thus the task is 'to understand how people work through professional organizations and informal networks to form communities and shared practices, languages and cultural understandings of the world' (ibid.). Other cultural studies theorists take this further and attempt to draw connections between the social and cultural conditions of production and the text itself (Havens, 2014; Havens et al., 2009; Saha, 2012). Thirdly, cultural studies of production are interested in the micro and the everyday interactions of cultural production. Havens et al. (2009) describe the critical media industry studies approach as 'midlevel fieldwork' – a 'helicopter view' that can track individual agents as they negotiate the terrain of cultural production, in contrast to the broad 'jet-plane view' offered by political economy.

Reflecting its interdisciplinary nature, cultural studies of production incorporate ethnographic research influenced by sociology and anthropology, but also the methods of literary analysis – including oral interviews, memory analyses, and auto-biographical methods as well as textual analyses of industry material like trade magazines that are treated as discourses of media production that constitute the media industries themselves. Havens (2014) observes new studies that are influenced by economic anthropology and cultural economy (du Gay and Pryke, 2002); following the notion of production as culture, these two disciplines offer methods that are directly suited to the task of interpreting and deconstructing the codes, rituals, representations and discourse of cultural production.

Yet despite its engagement with questions of power, some scholars have drawn attention to cultural studies of production's reluctance to deal with normative questions regarding media production. With its empirical emphasis on how cultural work is represented by workers themselves – and how production itself is a culture to be studied – Hesmondhalgh (2013: 56) asks how 'we are ultimately supposed to *evaluate* what is being observed' [our emphasis]. In contrast, Hesmondhalgh's own empirical study with Sarah Baker into cultural production in three media industries (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) tackles the normative head-on, asking whether creative labour can be considered 'good' or

'bad' work. Hesmondhalgh is working in the cultural industries tradition of critical political economy, but this approach shares strong affinities with cultural studies of production, not least the emphasis on the micro level and the need for empirical work (in contrast to political economy's perceived apathy towards micro studies of media production). Yet, it is due to its strong social theoretical grounding, that cultural industries research is perhaps better equipped to tackle normative questions relating to power, social justice and inequality – particularly in relation to the experiences of the cultural worker as mentioned above.

Indeed, when it comes to advancing media production research, the main contributions of both of these fields is mostly in terms of politics, in drawing attention to what is at stake politically for this field. In terms of methodological advancements, however, neither cultural studies of production or cultural industries research have much to add, other than recognition that 'ethnographic methods can enrich the field of media industries research hugely' (Hesmondhalgh, 2010: 250). Hesmondhalgh, in an essay entitled 'Politics, Theory, and Method in Media Industries Research', highlights the need to foreground 'empirical work (which means an engagement with methodological problems and dilemmas)' (ibid.), yet actual engagement with these issues is light. Cultural studies of production and similar critical empirical studies have much to offer in terms of focusing us on the everyday dynamics of media production in a way that does not shy away from and, in fact, treats seriously the 'messy, informal world of human actions' (Negus, 1997: 84) that characterize the cultural industries. Yet perhaps, this field would benefit from engaging with the methodological advancements and practices (and the problems and dilemmas that arise) in other fields that have had a sustained presence in media production research, such as news and journalism studies.

Keeping up with journalistic change

While researchers in cultural industries and theorists of culture have begun to engage more recently, if enthusiastically, with production research which examines the site and processes of media production, the tradition of production research has long been crucial to understanding news work and the journalistic cultures which play such a prominent role in shaping the public conversation. The pace of change in news production is fast, and the very boundaries which once defined journalism now seem constantly in flux. Usher (2014) and Ryfe (2012) have impressively shown that the tradition of long-term newsroom observation is not over (though Ryfe observes in Chapter 3 how it is in danger).

Several authors in this book revisit the accomplishments of news production research to date and focus their recommendations on gaps in our understanding of a fast-changing contemporary journalism. Reviews of online journalism research (Boczkowski, 2002; Domingo, 2005) suggest that studies in the earlier days of online news tended to concentrate on news content, the nature of the news workers, and on the audience, rather than on production routines and the production context.

Newsroom production ethnography has experienced a resurgence in the past decade. However, as Ryfe observes in his chapter, the long-term researcher exposure, which many writers regard as vital to a genuinely 'ethnographic' understanding, is rare indeed, and few contemporary researchers set out with the ambition of years – much less weeks or months – of observing their research setting. But how little immersive research is too little? Are alternative or complementary methods of investigating the creation of 'news' as, or more, effective than ethnographic processes?

As Paterson has observed elsewhere, without the many early ethnographic investigations of news production (prominent examples are cited earlier in this chapter), our understandings of journalism would be limited to what little we are able to glean from the observation of news content, or from what journalists say they do. Jerolmack and Khan (2014: 178) usefully demonstrate that it is a significant methodological problem that purely interview-based research tends to ignore 'the fact that what people say is often a poor predictor of what they do', and that surveys and interviews too often conflate attitude and behaviour. They respond to the argument that survey and interview research is more generalizable than ethnographic research by asking 'generalizable to what?' given the 'attitudinal fallacy' which they demonstrate. One response in media research is to continually test interview data against observational data, and to let one process inform the other (a central approach in Paterson, 2011). But there is reason to believe this is less than adequate, as was perhaps demonstrated by the spectacle of British tabloid journalists recounting, only when under oath and before Judge Leveson, extraordinary institutional pressure to produce an exploitative and socially toxic journalism which had rarely (if ever) been described in interviews with academic researchers (Leveson, 2012).

Much of the ethnographically informed research into news production of the past decade has usefully shown that utopian myths about revolutionary change in the nature of journalism have been just that, and the still evolving multimedia news production of the Internet age suffers from as many of the constraints as old news production, only

with added constraints like twenty-four-hour production cycles and shovelware dependence on public relations and wire services to meet content production targets limiting it further (Paterson and Domingo, 2008). There is ample, though often anecdotal, evidence that news-producing organizations are increasingly closed to researchers, making the discussion of how we are informed (by researchers) about how we are informed (by news media) ever more pressing.

Information is increasing shared through society in new ways, and indeed some argue that new structures of informal information sharing have effectively superseded or made less relevant the traditional hierarchical news media, making clear the need for methodological innovation which moves news production research beyond the boundaries of the traditional newsroom and is better able to grasp the conditions of production of this 'ambient journalism' (Hermida, 2010). One of the most dramatic and fast-paced changes to information acquisition in recent years has been the dramatic growth of new information providers which are social media natives, like *Buzzfeed*. Such organizations command the attention of millions around the world and are likely the main source of journalistic information for many, but research into their highly Web-metric-driven production practices remains rare; Anderson (2011), Usher (2013) and Tandoc (2014) provide important exceptions.

With our focus on shifting the conversation about advancing production research beyond its largely journalistic focus of the past, we refrain from further speculation about how new forms of news might be more effectively investigated and invite the reader to delve into the chapters ahead and to allow these to inspire their own investigations.

The structure of this book

This opening section of the book is designed to provide an overview of challenges confronting production research, and the major debates concerning research into a fast-changing media industry. Following this introductory chapter by the editors, this section includes essays by Philip Schlesinger and by David Ryfe, two of the three principle speakers at the 2013 conference which is the foundation of this book. That one-day conference was simultaneously an International Association of Media and Communication Researchers (IAMCR) pre-conference and an International Communication Association (ICA) post-conference, held at the University of Leeds in June 2013, and it is further described on the Acknowledgements page which precedes this introduction.