Distribution Matters // Media Circulation in Civic Life & Popular Culture

ICA Preconference Call

May 25, 2017 in San Diego

This preconference aims to examine how and why media distribution matters to civic life and media culture and the ways in which it underpins issues that are more traditionally examined in terms of media production or textual analysis. After all, many of the biggest challenges and opportunities facing the media industries today revolve around the capacity to circulate media and information instantaneously and more cheaply than ever before via the internet—what Michael Curtin, Jennifer Holt, and Kevin Sanson (2014) have referred to as the "distribution revolution."

At the same time, grappling with the signal importance of media distribution in industry and public life also means understanding that this importance is older than, and reaches beyond, today's commercial internet. Scholars from across the field of media industry research—and in other areas including media law and regulation, communication history, journalism studies, and cultural theory—have used a variety of analytical vocabularies to theorize the distribution process. Historian and social theorist Michael Warner (2002), for instance, offers examples from the 17th century press when he argues that distribution is the central concern in the construction of democratic publics. "Not texts themselves create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time," he writes. "Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and when a responding discourse can be postulated, can a text address a public" (p. 90). In other words, reliable distribution networks make possible the individual and collective conceit that when we publish a text we are speaking to the same assembled group over time.

Media distribution, then, can be read as the infrastructural heart of "imagined communities" in the style of Benedict Anderson (2006). If, as Charles Acland (2003) argues, "the organization of how, when, and under what conditions people congregate is a fundamental dimension of social life," it is through distribution practices and infrastructures that much of this organization takes place (Tryon, 2013), both historically and in today's media environment.

Call for Abstracts

We aim to bring together the growing group of scholars who focus on distribution as its own topic of study, as well as other work that intersects with distribution, but has not typically been framed in that way—topics such as internet governance, trending algorithms, digital rights management, media infrastructures, and others.

Participants should submit an extended abstract of **one to two pages**. Accepted abstracts will be developed into papers to be distributed to panelists and other attendees in advance of the event. Abstracts may take the form of brief case studies, position papers, conceptual interventions, or other formats likely to lead to engaged discussion. Rather than lengthy research presentations, participants will present briefly (5 minutes) on their work before participating in a roundtable discussion.

Submissions dealing with both contemporary and historical themes and subjects are welcomed, as are submissions from a wide variety of disciplinary approaches. Suggested topics include, *but are not limited to:*

Distribution and Imagined Community. How do contemporary, legacy, and historical distribution infrastructures, practices, and policies affect the construction of publics and our sense of community? Whether it's a nation's postal network, the broadcast radius of the local television station, the circulation footprint of the local newspaper, the far-flung reach of satellite television channels, or the "calculated publics" (e.g., Gillespie, 2014) produced by algorithms on contemporary online media platforms, we welcome explorations of the ways in which distribution brings together—or divides—publics and public discourses.

Distribution and Media Work. Can a focus on distribution broaden traditionally production-focused accounts of labor in the media industries, whether by considering distribution as an important form of labor unto itself or by exploring the impact of distribution on production work? We welcome accounts that examine what it takes to get content in front of audiences, and the various kinds of labour involved—from PR and marketing work to warehousing, shelf-stacking and transportation.

Distribution and Public Discourse. Much has been said—and debated—about the manner in which digital technologies have allowed ordinary people to distribute their own content, as well as the manner in which a few large online intermediaries have come to dominate revenues and the market for audiences' attention. Digital distribution platforms (and some of their his-

torical predecessors) also present us with a high-choice media environment characterized by filter bubbles and fragmentation. Where do these debates about disintermediation and fragmentation stand today? And what does it mean to examine them in terms of distribution?

Distribution, Public Visibility, and Surveillance. The infrastructures of distribution—the presence of papers on news racks or channels on the dial—have long served to make the audiences for particular media visible to a broader public, as well as to interpellate prospective members of those audiences/publics. At the same time, distribution infrastructures also offer tremendous affordances for surveillance—rifling the mail, intercepting telegraph signals, tapping phones, placing digital cookies, deep packet inspection. We welcome contributions that examine distribution as a tool of visibility and/or consider its role in the business and politics of seeing and being seen.

Distribution, Popular Culture, and Personalization. Digital media is characterized by the contrasting dynamics of increased sociability (through apps, social media and âĂŸsharing') and increased individualization (through mobile viewing, miniature screens, and personalized recommendations). By some accounts, media use has shifted from being a communal, in-person experience in theaters and living rooms to a rather more individual and personalized one, enjoyed by each user on her own personal device. We welcome contributions that examine the changing scale of media experiences through various distribution technologies.

Distribution and Intellectual Property. The one-click model of friction-free digital distribution is still a work in progress. Content providers, streaming services, and digital storefronts jockey for position in ways that have resulted in fragmentation, incompatible standards, and copy protection schemes that alter consumers' relationships with their media and devices. Unsurprisingly then, unauthorized distribution (i.e., piracy) remains a constant feature of everyday media consumption in all countries. We welcome contributions examining the relationship between distribution, IP, and consumption.

Affordances of Distribution, Past and Present. Digital distribution infrastructures include a tremendous number of high-tech affordances for selectively placing content in front of audiences—filters, recommender systems, geolocation/geoblocking, and metadata-based categorization to name just a few. What role do these affordances (and their associated constraints) play in contemporary media distribution and its social impacts? And what

historical precedents exist for what we typically think of as uniquely digital phenomena?

Format

Panelists whose abstracts are accepted will develop them into papers that will be distributed in May to preconference attendees in advance of the event. Participants will introduce, then discuss their papers with other scholars in a series of thematically organized roundtables, with the conversation moderated by a panel chair who participates in the conversation.

Roundtables will be held in front of the full audience of preconference attendees; after the initial moderated discussion the floor will be opened to audience questions. The final panel of the preconference will be a reflection by senior scholars on the work and themes of the day.

The organizers hope to work with participants following the event to develop a selection of the conference papers into papers for a special issue or edited volume.

Submission Process

Please email submissions to <distribution.matters.preconf@gmail.com> by November 20, 2016. Authors will be informed of acceptance/rejection decisions no later than December 20, 2016. Accepted abstracts will be posted to the preconference website in advance of the event.

If you have questions about submissions or any aspect of the preconference, you may direct them to <distribution.matters.preconf@gmail.com> or contact any of the individual organizers—Joshua Braun <jabraun@umass.edu>, Ramon Lobato <ramonlobato@gmail.com>, or Amanda Lotz <lotz@umich.edu>.

Location and Registration

The preconference will be held at San Diego State University's Conrad Prebys Aztec Student Union (6075 Aztec Cir Dr.), which is located directly on the San Diego trolley system's Green Line, making it reachable from the conference hotel for just $5 round-trip. For faster door-to-door service, par-

ticipants can split cab fares to and from the event. More details on transport to and from the event will be provided at a later date.

Registration will be limited to 60 persons via a registration code to be issued by the organizers. After accepted presenters have registered, registration will be open to anyone who requests a code until the cap of 60 is reached or administrative deadlines force us to finalize event attendance. Thanks to the generosity of our sponsors, we do not anticipate a registration fee.

Confirmed Participants

Sandra Ball-Rokeach, ICA Fellow, Professor in the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California, director of the USC Communication Technology and Community Program

Sandra Braman, ICA Fellow, John Paul Abbott Professor of Liberal Arts and Professor of Communication at Texas A&M University

Stuart Cunningham, Distinguished Professor of Media and Communications, Digital Media Research Centre, Queensland University of Technology

Greg Downey, Evjue-Bascom Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication and the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison

Sharon Strover, Philip G. Warner Regents Professor in Communication, director of the Technology and Information Policy Institute at UT Austin

Joseph Turow, ICA Fellow, Robert Lewis Shayon Professor of Communication, University of Pennsylvania Annenberg School for Communication

Special Thanks

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