DISTRIBUTION AND MEDIA FLOWS

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ABSTRACT While production, text and audience have been extensively covered by media and cultural studies scholars, the study of distribution is in its infancy. This essay argues that the distributive moment of the media cycle – incorporating delivery to audiences, business-to-business distribution and the redistribution of profits and information derived from audiences – is critical to an understanding of twenty-first-century cultural politics. It offers an analysis of distribution, and considerations on the politics of alternative modes of distribution.

WHY DISTRIBUTION?

Distribution is the core process in which economic and political moments of human communication take center stage. The management of product, payment and data flows between producers and audiences have however rarely been addressed in media studies terms other than regulation and control, with other aspects left to the instrumental disciplines of marketing and public
relations. Even the media economics textbooks of Doyle (2002) and Albarran (2002) have no entry for distribution in their contents or indexes. The lack of address to distribution derives from perspectives on media and mediation emphasizing culture, power, economics, indeed anything but what is here taken as the central fact of human action: communication in general and its materialization as media in particular. In this perspective, all mediation engages in commerce in its broadest sense – in the gift, in trade and barter, wherever in history people have exchanged things, favors or ideas. Modern distribution is characterized by its commodity form; contemporary exchange by its readiness to rework time as a raw material for the construction of markets, to play stasis against change, and to organize space hierarchically. Distribution is that function which organizes information in space and time, accelerating or delaying its delivery in spaces that it differentiates on that basis. In this sense distribution is the construction of difference; initially in distinguishing producer from audience, buyer from seller, and in a networked world further distinguishing and dividing populations by their temporal and spatial proximity to the economic power and political economy that is increasingly centralized, not at the site of production, but on the terrains of exchange. Critical to an understanding of contemporary cultural politics, distribution remains largely unanalyzed. The purpose of such analysis is to provide the grounds for an alternative cultural politics grounded in alternative models of distribution.

Producers produce use-values; audiences provide attention-value, creating both meanings and information about themselves, but crucially also working, unpaid, to produce the attention bought and sold by advertisers (Smythe 1994). Distribution is the site of production of exchange-value and thus of profit. Distribution is also the material ground of cultural dominance and political power. In the history of the dominant media of the last hundred years, distributors have been responsible for founding the economic empires of network radio (Douglas 1987), TV (Barnouw 1982; Smith 1995), film studios (Gomery 1986), telecommunications (Kieve 1973; Fischer 1992) and internet services (Schiller 1999). The hunger of film, broadcast and electronic distributors for content led them to acquire the means of production, production that, in the media industries, is largely determined by the success of previous products in distribution: what has not found a market in the past will not get distributed in the future. Likewise, governments throughout the twentieth century have been alert to the uses of censorship, not only as a means to power, but also as an exercise of power itself. That power today lies more generally in the hands of media corporations. The powers of both transnational corporations and governments can be defined as their ability to direct and delay the flow of mediation. Communication is the ground bass of society. Struggles over control of its flow are struggles over control of the social. That struggle takes place on the material ground of mediation: the material processes of communication.
In the narrower sense of negotiation by means of a go-between, in the broader sense of the life cycle of the media industry and in the broadest sense of the materiality of communication, the process of mediation is integrated, and distinctions between producing, distributing and the work of audiencing are to some extent artifacts of analysis rather than ontological categories. Nonetheless, such analysis is vital, given the scale and complexity of the mediation process. Marx is adamant that distribution and exchange, absorbed into the single category of distribution in the media industries and in the terminology adopted here, are subsidiary moments of production (Marx 1973: 96–9). Historically, the media industries have moved away from the production-centered economies of the nineteenth century, in one way proving Marx’s theses that “Production is always a particular branch of production” (ibid.: 91; emphasis in original), and that when “Distribution steps between the producers and the products” (ibid.: 94), the process is one of mutual mediation (ibid.: 91). The commodity form has a history, one in which the role of distribution has come to have an increasingly central role, for example in the form of companies based exclusively on branding (Klein 2000) and intellectual property (IP). In this process the alienation of creative labor in IP is indistinguishable from the alienation of physical labor power in exchange-value in Marx’s nineteenth century. Although objectively distribution cannot be divorced from production and consumption, in daily life that abstraction occurs in every economic act involving IP from trademarks to industrial designs. Distribution thus articulates producers and consumers, but does so by representing each to the other in “the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx 1976: 165).

Because distribution is the moment of flows between the other poles, it is uniquely vulnerable to regulation. Media production and audiencing are open to creativity, and to that extent, within the limits of institutional and ideological constraints, they are free. Indeed it is their freedom that makes them valuable, since the free creativity of producers and audiences is the labor from which the distributive moment extracts exchange-value, in the form of everything from appreciation indexes to bug reporting. Distribution is responsible not only for intervening between but also for managing the relationships of consumers and producers: the acceleration and delay, promotion and restriction, the spatiotemporal orchestration of flows. People communicate freely, but that communication is everywhere in chains. Audiences do not simply consume media artifacts: they attend to them, make sense of them, pay for them and, under contemporary conditions, consolidate into markets for them. The processes that bring media to audiences, and that return audience response and money back to production are both integral to and distinguishable within the wider process of mediation. Bought, borrowed, bartered, stolen or given, the object must somehow arrive. Production, centered on craft and technologies that embed older craft, and audiencing,
grounded in recognizing and making meaning, only appear as political-economic activities when seen from the point of view of distribution. The projected purchase by a Sony-led consortium of MGM-United Artists’ 4,100 film and 10,000 episode TV libraries includes as a member Comcast, a US cable company with 22 million subscribers. Comcast alone is not included in the buyout of other consortium members, because it will supply the critical video-on-demand delivery of the library to premium consumers, likewise managing the onward sale of titles to less privileged markets through terrestrial networks (Economist 2004: 68). Sony is already the owner of Columbia-TriStar studios, in a deliberate maneuver to ensure that it never again faces exclusion from the domestic equipment market for lack of content to distribute (Lardner 1987). This large-scale but nonetheless typical conglomeration indicates the centrality of distribution to both content and hardware. For this reason, distribution is associated with the economic axis in Figure 1.

A materialist philosophy of mediation deals with relations between the physical, dimensional and informational aspects of the world. Mutually dependent (as in the energy cost of structure, or the bending of space by mass), they are nonetheless distinctive, as is the case with the moments of mediation. Communication involves three tasks, each a source of value. The technological mediation of matter and energy in space and time produces objects. The work of audiencing (the neologism is intended to stress that it is work) deploys technique (styles, conventions, icons...) to mediate between matter-energy and the informational apex, here characterized as

![Diagram of Matter-Energy, Production Technologies, Audiences Techniques, Economies, Space-Time, Distribution, Emergence-Entropy]
a relation between homeostasis and change, whether entropic or emergent. The distributive is the exchange of information across time and space. Some financial transactions, for example, move far more swiftly when a bank is being paid than when an individual is waiting for a check to clear. And the US–Mexico border can be traversed far more quickly going South than North. Such is the typical intervention of distribution in the organization of space and time, space as time.

The diagram (Figure 1) shows a moment when audience and producer meet directly in the physical object. At that moment, given the diminishing role of face-to-face communication in contemporary life, both producer and audience are most frequently imaginary constructs of one another. An author implies a reader in the text, and a reader infers an author. To some extent the economic exchange between dimensional and informational moments is equally fictive, in its de-emphasis of the exchange of physical product, and also because the work of distributing has characteristics of both production (the manufacture of exemplars) and audiencing (as when TV executives rely on “gut reaction” identifications with their audience in program purchasing). Today the famed instincts of industry heroes like Irving Thalberg (Fitzgerald’s “Great Gatsby”) are more likely to be supplied from the business-to-business sector through agencies like webtrendslive, specialists in tracking websurfers through cookie technology, or market research firms like AC Nielsen. Likewise the nose of the old-time showmen for a possible market opening has been overwhelmed by global film and television markets like MIP-TV and MIP-COM, and ballyhoo by PR agencies. Increasingly alienated from the creative moments of production and audiencing, distribution has become the critical moment of their control in regimes of power and commodification. Though we might otherwise hope, with Habermas (1993), for universal well-being as a result of communication, emphasizing the regulation and commodification of both media products and audiences casts light on the origins of ignorance, poverty and oppression.

CONCEPTUALIZING DISTRIBUTION

Perhaps one reason why distribution has received relatively little attention is that in information theory it is the channel through which media are delivered. In Shannon and Weaver's mathematical theory, the channel is insignificant: only sending and receiving are vital. Distribution is in this sense a “black box.” Media critique that has addressed the nature of channels has in general taken a McLuhanite line: the channel matters to the extent that it is determining of the message, and therefore of the positions of sender and receiver.  

Slightly more sophisticated variants of sender-receiver theory, from the “uses and gratifications” school of mass communication to technologically literate theories of emergence, ascribe either transparency or agency to the technologies of communication, without
addressing their economic and regulative functions. Textual models, like Schatz’s (1981) famous triangular model of production, text and reader, again elide the moment of distribution, and in so doing reduce the complexity of the productive and the audience moments. His model does provide a richer understanding of textual functions, but presumes the arrival of the text at a prompt instant between production and audiencing. Emphasizing the ways in which the social audience is shaped, in both Gramscian hegemonic and Habermasian public sphere variants, by the constraints that production and public discourse place on it, the cultural studies tradition has likewise rarely addressed distribution, the determining instanced that what is not available cannot be contested, and that control over what is distributed determines the grounds on which contestation can occur. In Stuart Hall’s (1997) cyclical model, the key networked terms are representation, identity, production, regulation and consumption. Regulation here impacts on production, mediates between representation and consumption, and articulates with identity. But regulation is not only a matter of policy or cultural bylaws. It is the positive activity of managing territories, deferring arrivals and articulating agencies within as well as without the media industries. Given the centrality of lived audiences to cultural studies, of textuality to hermeneutics, and engineering standards to information theory, the lack of address to distribution is understandable. A media-based analysis of media cannot however afford this lacuna. The most convincing contemporary political economist of the media, Vincent Mosco (1996) deploys categories of commodification, spatialization and structuration as a basis for analyzing relations between economic and political cycles of media. His analysis is processual, describing activities that occur throughout the media cycle but which come to a sharp focus in the distributive moment.

Unlike theoretical writers, historical analyses of major industries such as film (Gomery 1992; Wasko 2003), radio (Barnouw 1966), television (Boddy 1993) and popular music (Sanjek and Sanjek 1991; Burnett 1996), and more specialized studies like Oliver Boyd-Barrett’s of The International News Agencies (1980), do foreground issues of distribution. The distribution of ideas outside the industrial media are the subject of key work by Appadurai (1996) and Hannerz (1996) among many other scholars of globalization. That this perspective should become available in the opening years of the twenty-first century is itself a product of the cultural politics of the network society, and particularly of the growing centrality of IP to contemporary capital and to neoliberal globalization strategies. Castells, from whom the term derives, distinguishes three features of the network society:

- it is informational: knowledge generation and information management determine the productivity and competitiveness of firms, industries, regions
it is global: “its core strategic activities have the capacity to work as a unit on a planetary scale in real time or chosen time” (Castells 2000: 10)

- it is networked: it is premised on “the Internet-based, interactive, networked connection between producers, consumers and service providers” (Castells 2001: 75)

This analysis, revisited with the focus on mediation, devolves not on the geographical optic of the “space of flows,” but on the production of IP and its management as more than a rapidly growing sector of the economy (IIPA figures show growth of US copyright industries from $178.8 billion in 1977, to $765.6 billion in 2000, and to $791.2 billion in 2001 [IIPA 2002: 17]). They also provide the model for any successful enterprise. The management of IP, the ability to share knowledge and its management globally, and the networked interactivity of all participants in the network economy, in short all three of Castells’ categories of network society, belong to the activity here described as distribution.

The materiality of distribution’s role is underlined in Article 2 of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) Copyright Treaty: “Copyright protection extends to expressions and not to ideas, procedures, methods of operation or mathematical concepts as such” (WIPO 1996). An idea is not intellectual property until it is expressed in a material form – that is until it becomes available for distribution. This in turn implies the existence of physical infrastructures through which content can reach audiences. James Wilsdon notes another aspect of the materiality of IP distribution, again involving business-to-business (B2B) trade:

Back in July [2000], Amazon.com teamed up with Federal Express to deliver 250,000 copies of the new Harry Potter book to eager US fans. True to the spirit of 1-click™ shopping, no effort was spared in ensuring that the book hit people’s doormats on the morning of publication. A press release issued the next day proudly declared it to be “one of the largest sales and distribution events in e-commerce history”. In just 24 hours, over 300 tonnes or 188 million pages of Harry Potter magic were transported to homes across America... At strategic locations across America, a fleet of 9000 trucks revved their engines, 100 planes rolled down the runways. Their mission: to deliver Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire to a nation hungry for instant fulfilment.

The distribution of the physical objects that producers make is big business – with a measurable environmental impact. And each element of the infrastructure from conduits to contracts is a potential node at which “value” can be produced, or exchange-value extracted. Agencies that specialize in getting programmers in front of schedulers, authors’ and actors’ agents, CD and DVD design and
pressing plants, retailers and point-of-sale advertising, all participate, and all regulate, the traffic between makers and meanings. Anyone can make a song or a story, but getting songs and stories out to the public is a specialist, strategic exercise. Keeping information and ideas out of public circulation is equally a function of distribution. Both promoting and denying circulation confer wealth and power, introducing disjunctures, deferrals, omissions and selections that restructure and reorganize both content and audience activity.

DISTRIBUTION INDUSTRIES

Even in industrial circles where distribution is understood as a clearly separate activity from production, there can be difficulties establishing its boundaries. In many media, distribution companies belong to producers as in the case of Disney’s Buena Vista wing (Wasko 2001: 42–8) and the global film distributor United International Pictures, whose major shareholders are Paramount (Viacom) and MGM-UA (now Sony and Comcast; Acland 2003: 31 cites figures suggesting that twelve distributors control 96 percent of global film traffic). Pricing in the entertainment industries – the actualization of exchange-value – bewilders the most ardent economists: from the agent-regulated supply of stars’ appearances to the marginal cost of selling a TV show to a developing-world network. Even in relatively straightforward exchanges like those between distributors and theatre owners, complex contracts regulate such aspects as ticket prices, the number of screens showing a film, the number of shows per day and the duration of the run. And even a wholly owned subsidiary like Buena Vista can evolve its own priorities and tactics vis-à-vis its proprietor and its sister theater chain over a period of years. So for example Broadcasting & Cable reported on Feb 4, 2002, “AOL Time Warner nets The WB, TNT and TBS Superstation will pony up at least $75 million for New Line Cinema’s Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring and two upcoming sequels,” observing that New Line as well as the three cable stations are all AOL-Time-Warner subsidiaries. Transfer pricing involved in global exchanges deploys the spatial differences between information values in yet more complex ways. The accounting procedures – and the significant revenue streams derived from them – involved in this trade would require a separate specialist study, but the impact of differential pricing across space and time clearly impacts on the free flow of communication.

Time also plays a role in the interaction between distributors and producers in the form of feed-forward loops. Independent exhibitors and international distributors competing for a blockbuster movie will enter into contracts with producers that may be signed before a single camera rolls. Toy and fast-food franchises gamble on the success of the film, influencing its composition (perhaps through product placement for example) but also sign up to restrictions on how images and themes can be used. Producers, exhibitors and purchasers can be legally bound to use the product in restricted ways, exemplified
in the copyright warnings at the beginning of every DVD and VHS. Distribution benefits and binds all parties. Equally, all parties within and without the industry are engaged in complex chains of payment and credit that can become extremely fraught. In return for a slice of their earnings, talent agencies like MCA and William Morris (Rose 1995) regulate the availability of stars, directors and scriptwriters among others, with notoriously tangled financial and contractual procedures. B2B deals can be equally constraining, as was the case, notoriously, with Technicolor contracts in the 1930s and 1940s that required the company's technicians to be on set throughout, promoting the interests of the process at times in opposition to those of the film's director of photography and director. Joint ventures and strategic alliances require fiercely complex accounting and legal structures. The internal and external dynamics of distribution then include massive internal redistribution of content, data and money, not a simple two-way flow of money in exchange for content.

Distributors like UIP and Buena Vista are responsible for bringing the revenues from audiences back through the chain to the producers. Large corporations like UK-based advertising giant WPP charge for a range of services including media buying for marketing campaigns, market research, hard- and software delivery and accounting, all of which require credit and other banking services charged back to other divisions, thence to the client and ultimately to their consumers. The strategic position of film distributors between the box-office and the studio, to take a familiar example, requires meticulous oversight and skilled accounting, not least because figures have to be presented one way for studio heads and another for bankers, a third way for talent and differently again for advertising purposes. As movement of money on national and global scales becomes increasingly electronic, the distinction between the directions of flow diminishes, for example as presales of miscellaneous distribution rights become significant parts of production financing (Caves 2000: 161–71). In the case of film distribution, a physical product still has to arrive at a cinema, and in older times cash had to change hands. But now that product can be delivered and revenues handled electronically, the position of distribution as the nexus through which digital signals flow in both directions is clearer than in the analog/photomechanical period. Distributors derive rents from the media they handle, including financial media. These rents arise from control over flows: delaying a release here in order to boost the prestige and prices of a premiere there, charging higher for the freshest news and therefore delaying its arrival to lower-paying users, speeding up or slowing down returns from consumers to the various service providers involved in the distribution process. Talent who opt to take points or royalties may wait considerably longer than investors, frequently companies like HBO whose core business is distribution, who have extended credit to a production and who are therefore charging interest. Distribution is then not only a question of geography but also of time.
Refining the initial definition then, distribution can be considered as the management of space-time flows of product and money. There is also an informational aspect to distribution. Not only does distribution bring news, entertainment and advertising to audiences; it is also a feedback loop. The cash flow returning to producers is not merely money: it is also vital data confirming the performance of products in the marketplace, and thereby shaping both the future handling of the current product and what further products will be commissioned. Box-office statistics, like pop-music charts, are significant elements in marketing and in the management of creative industry careers. In this sense, the television-ratings business belongs to the distributive moment of the media cycle. Moreover, not only absolute but also relative returns signify. Absolute numbers can fluctuate as whole markets rise and fall seasonally (for example around Christmas) and across larger scales (such as the fall in cinema attendance associated with the arrival of video and its rise in the age of the multiplex [Acland 2003]). The relative success of Disney and AOL-Time-Warner is also of significance to shareholders and industry observers, who in turn distribute information on market share and reach to potential advertisers or partners in the lucrative spin-off markets like fast-food, clothing and computer games (Doyle 2002).

Wherever the point of sale, a new industry derives further profit not just from the money that changes hands, but also from data associated with the exchange (Gandy 1993). A credit card transaction for a barcoded ticket locates a purchaser at a specific outlet at a specific time, and matches the purchase with a profile of other purchases to produce data sets that can be sold on to marketing agencies and ultimately back to producers. Loyalty cards in physical stores and cookies in online sales environments harvest data, much of it culled without the buyers’ knowledge. Other information is amassed through the use of phone-ins, especially those using mobile phones, competitions and prize-draw questionnaires. Whether this data-gathering is a genuine exchange (Dyson 1997) or a near-fraudulent purloining (Elmer 2004), it constitutes a major element of the value of the act of purchasing, combining money flows with information flows that return through the distribution chain to be amassed among corporate conglomerates as a tool for gaining market advantage and militating against start-up companies seeking access to the industry. Once again, money and data are decreasingly distinguishable.

Technologies themselves require distribution, the more so since the media cycle depends on audiences supplying their own tools, tools that the media industries must bring to markets where they can be purchased. Transport is also critical to the movement of people, who themselves constitute media when they are the vehicles for distributing songs, jokes, religious rituals, languages and other communications, the most vital for cinema being word-of-mouth publicity. Long considered integral to the sociology and geography of communications, transport becomes only more clearly integrated
into media communication when not only container loads of TV sets but also satellite delivery of hundreds of channels of audiovisual, telecoms and data are added to global trade, and as financial flows integrate telecoms with the trade in goods and services. Transport is one of the tools available to distribution for rationing media. The relative speeds of airfreight, seafreight, land transport can affect not just the delivery of film prints but also of documents, contracts and bank drafts, customs clearances and carnets, delaying or accelerating the arrival of hardware and software in global markets differentiated by their proximity or distance, measured in weeks rather than miles, from the centers of the media industry. Levies can be raised at every level from the costs of import policy change to corruption among functionaries.

One further sectoral interest in distribution remains to note: the role of the state. Though nation states have lost much of their economic and political autonomy in the era of globalization, and indeed perhaps as a direct result of that loss, governments have devoted a great deal of energy to maintaining a stake in the control of information and entertainment (see for example the interventionist ethos of the UK’s Creative Industries Task Force report on television export markets, Department for Culture, Media and Sport 1998). Censorship, state-run media, industry regulation and tariffs have been used to limit the permeability of given states to both free markets and alternative media. More positively, many countries provide substantial subsidies to public service media, and to cultural sectors including minority languages and culturally validated forms like cinema, opera, theater and dance. The most staunchly protectionist market is undoubtedly the United States, which has developed idiosyncratic technical standards (for example in television and cellphone telecoms) as well as corporate strategies that help exclude the country from global media product (Herman and McChesney 1997; Wasko 2003: 80 gives figures of domestic box-office take for Hollywood studios and their affiliates of 80–90 percent). The engagement of states in distribution is thus both positive and negative, both promoting specific production sectors and limiting others. As generators of information, governments also seek to control their own media flows through selective leaks and schedules for press and media releases. Censorship traditionally meant the geographical control of information. Given the leakiness of electronic media, designed both to transmit and copy, censorship now tends toward the temporal control of delay. In many instances, the result is the same: what might have been a shocking revelation on the day is a mere historical footnote a matter of weeks or even days later. Like any human activity, governance cannot but communicate. Nations’ role in distribution is shaped by the same priorities as corporations’: promoting some flows and delaying or denying others, where possible amassing monopoly use of key data, and struggling to maintain both the monopoly and the legitimations for it.
THE WORK OF DISTRIBUTION

For the workforce in the distribution sector, the amount of work required to deliver product to audiences, and revenues and data to producers, cannot be underestimated. Film distributors, for example, do far more than dump movies in cinemas, though that is itself a massive transport effort when opening weekends may see up to three or four thousand prints delivered in the USA alone. Apart from the provision of security against piracy, in the expanded realm of electronic distribution distributors not only handle promotion but also new media formats, whose standing hinges on their ability to match users to products, and on their creditworthiness with suppliers. This gives the distributor the advantage of being able to recommend specific product lines, but makes them vulnerable to major suppliers seeking to maintain or challenge market dominance, and diminishes the incentives to pioneer new hardware and software formats. Thus distributors must mediate between the rival claims of homeostasis and change in the consumer end of their business, where change will involve the development of new and the gradual decay of established markets and product lines. Radical innovation involves the creation of a new audience, defined by its embrace of the new product. Routine novelty maintains and reaffirms an existing audience construction. In either case, the information content of distribution involves either space or time or both: an established product to a new market (Hollywood film in the People's Republic), or a new product in an established market (DVD usurping VHS). Innovation is measurable as a ratio between the expected and the unexpected, with zero information content at either end of the spectrum (repetition or noise). But this ratio is not absolute, as long as it depends on what is predictable in a given geographical zone. Giant cable distributor HBO, for example, has established a major reputation for quality drama, using one successful innovation (The Sopranos) to launch others (such as Six Feet Under) where the ninety-minute, adult-themed, idiosyncratic series drama has become a recognizable genre of its own. Entrusted with supplying producers with information about what is likely to succeed in future based on their experience of what has succeeded in the recent past, distributors must balance the claims of formula and familiarity against the need for constant novelty. Their considerable expertise in regional and sectoral variation, which they can sell back to producers, provides distributors with another profit stream. In this way distribution mediates between the space-time parameters of media on the one hand, and information about their reception on the other. Such information takes the form of money returned from paying customers as well as data about their preferences, both circulated in the form of electronic data streams. Thus a key task of distribution is to ensure the redistribution of money in space and time.

Information itself has monetary value. It must be timely to be information at all, and must be delivered to geographically specific
audiences. These audiences are constructed in hierarchies. Thus distributors will often provide key reviewers, retailers and increasingly influential fansites with advance access to restricted previews and trade shows in order to create prerelease buzz. In exchange, such access underwrites the industry kudos of key distributive functionaries in radio stations, press and rental chains. A similar service is provided by film festivals like Cannes, industry conferences like SIGGRAPH (the premier event for computer graphics professionals) and markets like the Frankfurt Book Fair, even academic conferences. Attendance marks attendees as players, and in return attendees act as conduits for new product and product lines to their home markets with the increased mana derived from their involvement. The real targets of such restricted events are always at one remove, both spatially and temporally; not so much the tastemaker as her circle of influence. To be “where it’s at” implies being there before the mass market arrives, at a distinct place and a distinct moment. The delay between expert and mass distribution is a crucial one in terms of the production of value, social, financial and informational. These restrictions of media flows to specific audiences at specific times indicate a key task of distribution: participation in the construction of audiences. Professional audiences (such as members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences) are more valuable than commercially or politically distinguished audiences (women, youth, etc.), and these more than nonspecific audiences that must make up in numbers what they lack in specialization.

The value of information diminishes not solely according to time but in direct proportion to the attention that it generates. Media retailers, including not only broadcasters but also cinema operators, video store and bookshop managers and newsagents, are paid for delivering audiences. Making sure that key audiences see the right media at the right time is a skilled profession. Tastemakers must get sneak previews, but release must be delayed. Fear of piracy now favors global simultaneous release for entertainment media, but even simultaneity requires carefully restricted press previews and security at laboratories, studios and manufacturing plants. Software beta testing demands a wide and expert user base, but also restriction to that base in advance of full public release. In this context, media crime is a levy on a levy. Stolen media and communications hardware and their resale constitute a significant part of the grey economy. Systems and technologies designed to make theft and resale more difficult also form part of the distributive cycle. The same is true of fraud, IP and data theft and of attempts to stem them. The mutual surveillance of criminals and security experts is significant work, and therefore also a significant source of profit and power. It should be clear however that the vast majority of hard- and software crime, despite the emotive epithet “organised,” is undertaken without institutional organization parallel to the scale of, say, News Corp. Criminal redistribution of hardware suffers especially from the lack
of organized transportation; IP theft lacks the organizational impact of data sets held by entertainment cartels or monopoly suppliers of news like government information agencies; and both lack that organization which creates valuably disciplined audiences.

As Stiglitz (2002) observes, classical economics presumes ideally informed consumers, but where the market is itself a market in information, then stockpiling, delaying and selective releasing of information constructs the market as unequal, a fact enshrined in the secrecy with which national, corporate and global organizations like the IMF conduct their business. These inequalities arise in the mediations that distribution performs in distributing stasis and change across space and time, in the process differentiating the public into market segments distinguished by their degrees of specialized consumption skills, strategic redistributive positions and the complexity of the data they produce as well as the disposable income they command. Constituting a market segment as gendered or as national, for example, is achieved by selective releasing and withholding of information, emphasizing human interest stories in one market, withholding overseas news in the other. From guild membership to the early adopter lifestyle group, valuable markets are constructed in the formation of mediascapes undertaken in the distributive feedback loops of mediation. Current innovations like viral marketing into playgrounds indicate the levels at which these processes are colonizing even the regulated spaces of childhood.

**THEORY AND PRACTICE OF DISTRIBUTION**

What politics there may be, what culture may come about in the twenty-first century will be mediated. In existing democracies not only is voting a mediated form but voters are also represented, their views garnered as polls and referenda and mediated as statistical aggregations. Their politicians engage in public relations via print and electronic media, political decisions are mediated as laws, demonstrators perform for city streets and terrorists for the mass media. The media itself is thoroughly mediated in national lobbies, in international policy forums like IIPA and the International Telecommunications Union’s World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), and in international treaties like WIPO and Trade in Intellectual Property and Services (TRIPS) addendum to the WTO treaty. At the same time, civil movements have embraced new technologies of networked and mobile media. The crucial difference between corporate mass media and citizens’ media is neither the skill with which they are constructed nor the ability to elicit passionate commitment from audiences. It lies instead in the challenge of getting messages to audiences, in short in the field of distribution. The processes of getting stories and slogans out to the wider public, and especially the challenge of matching the global reach of increasingly convergent infotainment, computing and telecommunications corporations, requires the development of alternative channels of distribution.
Undertaken locally and globally by religions, diasporas, families, friendship networks, voluntary organizations and fan cultures, “cultural” distribution nets overlay the “market” systems of mass media, sometimes amplifying class, race and gender segmentation, sometimes muting them. This distributed form of distribution may involve reinventions of tradition, locality, identity as well as challenges to and innovations in them, in aggregate resonating with Rosenau’s (2003) “fragmegration.” Alternative mediations, it is true, always run the risk of becoming the unpaid research and development wings of corporate capital, but only so long as they are dependent on corporate means of distribution. Establishing alternate circuits of dialogue, and the constant reinvention of distributive mechanisms as a tactic for avoiding co-option, are a central plank of distributive politics and distributive ethics. Their association with criminality in officially circulated media – for example the illegal transport of migrants, the specter of hacking, and the association of alternative media with terrorism – is an indication of the extremism with which privileged access to the means of distribution is protected.

Certain kinds of information are only valuable if they are not distributed. Military secrets, police evidence (especially during investigations) and the workings of central banks are examples of information that gains in value to the extent that it is withheld from distribution. This negative distribution is itself a function of the distributive moment, and generates both wealth and power. Theft, for example, requires secrecy for success. The more people involved in a crime, the more important the distribution of information becomes. High-risk crimes like confidence tricks require a carefully managed distribution of partial information and disinformation, a careful balancing of fiction and fact, to secure their goals. The restriction of information to professional groups is considered a legitimate cost of efficiency, even of democracy: budgets are not released preferentially, jury deliberations are protected from undue scrutiny, and armed forces routinely withhold information. There are certainly ethical issues involved here (Where is the threshold between legitimate concealment of privileged discussions and illegitimate concealment of covert actions?). Ethics in distribution can be read as an economics of power and a politics of the economic.

Professional and philosophical ethics here concern the legitimacy or otherwise of control over the positive and negative distribution of information. Negative distribution includes, for example, withholding a consumer profile from the consumer, restricting access to audience information for the audience surveyed, and restricting the design of market research in the interests of corporate goals. Positive distribution includes the dissemination of professional ethics and codes of practice. Both contribute to a core function of distribution: the process of legitimating the differential treatment of mediation across its dimensional and informational modes. If “Social systems can be viewed as networks of communicative actions; personality
systems can be regarded under the aspect of the ability to speak and act" (Habermas 1979: 98), the distributed nature of these networks and abilities intervenes in the processes whereby the accumulation of mediation is acceptable or contested. Acceptance and contestation in their turn need to be mediated and therefore distributed, under the systemic conditions examined here of accelerations, deferrals and selections. The “ability to speak” requires, for its realization, access to someone to speak to.

All human communication requires its moment of address. In dialogic communities we can still hear the mutuality of that relationship in call-and-response patterns. Even at this innocent level, however, audiences do not constitute themselves. Nor are they constructed by textuality or by technologies. The art of directing communication to the people who will want it is now the science of market segmentation. The construction of the other as other is a moment of communication that divides by directing communications preferentially and reserving some communications for peers alone. Typically, this results in ascribing to those excluded from communications an inability to communicate. This discrimination has been raised to a science in contemporary distribution, underpinned by a history of control over mediations that has produced those inequalities, expropriations and antagonisms on which the dark contradictions of the commodity form have arisen. Despite the characterization of globalization as “powerless places and placeless power,” media systems still operate on a deeply conservative maintenance of spatial relations. Ex-colonial capitals still have significant impact on the distributive systems of their old colonies (see for example Armes 1985), and the system linking Southern California to the East Coast banks established in the 1910s (Wasiko 1986) remains hegemonic. This geographic specificity distinguishes distribution in the globalization process, an indicator of its potential for blocking the evolution of human communication.

Other modes of distribution exist. Indigenous rights based on community, tradition, trust and intimacy are antipathetic to the legal “persons,” almost exclusively corporations, who own IP and dominate global treaty making (Yudice 2003: 218–21). Others are based on democracy and many-to-many technologies, and integrate with projects to build alternative audiences. Their development is likely to be the subject of papers in this journal. Meanwhile every stage of commodity distribution is prone to mishaps. Backfiring projects and criminal actions disenable any attempt to erect a watertight system for controlling what is by its nature the infinitely fecund generation of human communications. Globalization brings not only localization but also alternative modes of global relationships, from crime syndicates to diasporas, which act as distributive networks, outside the whale as well as inside. The development of P2P (peer-to-peer) networks, of Open Source software (and its recent adoption by the UN: see http://www.iosn.org/), the economics of barter implied by the Creative
Commons movement all point to alternative modes of distribution to place alongside informal community television, video workshops and small label music networks.

Resistance is a property of the strong. For too long media and cultural studies have posited resistance as a code word for positive values—resistant texts, cultures and readings have marked the good in disciplines that eschew the intrinsic values of connoisseurship. From the systemic perspective of mediation theory, resistance is a restriction of flow. For a politics that believes that wealth and power originate with the wealthy and powerful, a politics of resistance makes sense. But if, as mediation theory proposes, it is the land (Leopold 2001), the multitudes (Hardt and Negri 2000) and the history of the species stored in technologies and techniques that is creative and productive, then resistance is the role of the oppressor. As the sources of wealth lie in human, natural and fixed capital, so the sources of power lie in the same upwellings from below. Political power and accumulated wealth derive from these, characteristically from blocking, deferring, redirecting, levying and stockpiling flow: in short, from resisting the open system. The disenfranchised always demand change. The wealthy and entrenched always seek ways to stop it. Even when they claim to innovate, or urge the demands of a new class fraction among the rulers, they always pursue stagnation of the fundamental division of society into those with access to information, money and power, and those without. The oppressed are not powerless but the source of power, the creators of wealth even though they are poor. The rich want our power and our wealth. The ideology of resistance reverses the real relations of emergence and stasis, ascribing stasis to those from whom communication flows, and emergence to those whose power and wealth derives from blocking it. The politics of resistance is a kind of benevolent populist conservatism: the rich instructing the poor on how to resist change, when change is invariably in the interests of those who suffer. We should not instruct our students that taking over the existing institutions is worthless: systemic change is at least as likely to come incrementally as by revolution. But we have no business telling them that they should be resistant. Far more important to create new circuits, new economies, alongside the new technologies and techniques that are such a hallmark of the contemporary mediascape. Analysis of distribution is the key to liberating communication in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

The author would like to acknowledge the advice and input of Bill MacArthur and the painstaking reviewers of Cultural Politics.

1. The work of audiencing, of disciplined and differentiated attention, produces the significance that the raw objects made in production do not possess. Significance is equally a matter of meanings, of
numbers, of reaching target audiences, and of the information audiences generate in the acts of purchasing and interacting with the media. To the extent that capitalism measures significance as value, it is the quantum of audience attention that is traded in industrial media, though corporate data acquisition systems and holdings are increasingly accounted as assets.

2. In the current analysis, technologies belong properly to the production moment of the media cycle. Technologies give form (dimensionality) to the physical attributes of media, and concurrently actualize (give physical presence to) the dimensions of space and time as they are constructed in media. The product of production is thus an object, physically constituted in space and time, an essential element of the process of creating commodities. This mediation is then further mediated in distribution. McLuhan (for example 1964), like apparatus theory (see Heath and de Lauretis 1980), does not look in detail at delivery mechanisms beyond the space-time determinations of the object, inferring that the object, in this instance the technologies used to convey content, also produces effects in the audience, demeaning the audiences’ work on the media. To the extent that hardware is integral to the experience of most media, and that broadcast, for example, is experienced differently to the reading of a book, McLuhan’s observations are correct. But the relative invisibility of the distributive moment implies that technologies are not always experienced by audiences at all, as with data harvesting or freight. Nor is the cycle of media exclusively determined by either the content (the messages of information theory) or the technologies of production.

3. End users are not only active audiences, participating in the production of meaning: they also work – again, unpaid – on the distribution of media, in the household, in gift giving, in small public spaces like bars where the choice of certain kinds of music or certain types of television program are channeled preferentially into micromarkets that gradually take interest in the media which are supposed to interest them (capital’s market variant on Lacan’s *sujet supposé savoir*). This is a part of the process of consumer discipline – the construction of common media interests that consequently define specific age cohorts, class fractions, sexualities and lifestyle groups.

**REFERENCES**


