

An Introduction to Informal Media Economies

Television & New Media
13(5) 379–382
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DOI: 10.1177/1527476412443565
<http://tvnm.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

This special issue of *Television and New Media* showcases current research on informal media production and distribution networks. Situated partly or wholly outside regulated, consolidated, and policy-governed audiovisual industries, the networks studied here include video circuits in West Africa, new media infrastructures in the Caribbean, user-driven streaming sites, and transnational VHS piracy. Together, these accounts provide glimpses of what may be best described as an interlocking set of *informal media economies*: zones of unmeasured and unevenly regulated media production and exchange, which articulate with conventional media systems in unpredictable ways.

Keywords

Informal economies, informality, film, television, piracy, intellectual property

Since the early 1970s, a rich body of work in economic anthropology, sociology and urban studies has explored the dynamics of the informal economy, otherwise known as the hidden, irregular, shadow, parallel, or secondary economy. Beginning with studies of unemployment in Africa and Latin America (Bromley and Gerry 1979; Hart 1973; ILO 1972), then migrating to first-world urban research (Sassen 1988), this line of inquiry has produced a set of theories, concepts and tools for analyzing the mutually constitutive relations between different kinds of economic and social activity—regulated and unregulated, legal and criminal, taxed and off-the-books, capitalist and communitarian.

This issue of *Television and New Media* asks what insights this approach can generate for media industry analysis.¹ While television studies, media policy studies, and the political economy of communications tradition have tended to focus on large-scale, nationally regulated industries, this does not always help us to understand what

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lies outside this space—pirate DVD and VCD economies, off-the-books cable TV systems, video-hosting sites, BitTorrent, user-created virtual worlds, and so on. These systems are part of a wider media landscape that articulates in unpredictable ways with formal screen and entertainment industries. Studying these interactions may produce a deeper understanding of key issues and problems in contemporary media analysis, from the politics of media access to emerging patterns of innovation and transformation.

Drawing inspiration from pioneering research by scholars including Brian Larkin (2004, 2008) and Ravi Sundaram (2009), and from a broader body of work in communications studies (e.g., Boyd, Straubhaar, and Lent 1989; Ganley and Ganley 1985), media anthropology (e.g., Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002), and cultural history (e.g., Johns 1998), this issue explores some of the analytic possibilities that present themselves when we view media systems through the prism of informality. We hope to provide a positive and productive rubric through which to explore longstanding debates about alternative media, piracy, revenue leakage, user sovereignty, and cocreation. The contributors to this special edition neither condemn nor celebrate the informal; rather, they identify points of articulation between formal and informal media worlds and assess the forms of popular engagement and experience they open up or close down.

In our opening essay, Tom O'Regan revisits early debates about the VCR as an entry point into a wide-ranging discussion of media market transformation. Reminding us of the significance of video, a technology of “unprecedented flexibility, manipulability, robust character, transportability, reproducibility and reusability, and radical decentralisation,” O'Regan shows how the VCR sparked an expansion of formal *and* informal media markets, becoming foundational to both legal and pirate audiovisual distribution. For O'Regan, attention to “continuities and interdependencies” between the two realms and their many interactions is the key to an effective understanding of media history.

Anna Cristina Pertierra foregrounds the centrality of informal media to daily life in a centrally planned economy. In Cuba, vast quantities of foreign audiovisual content—including telenovelas, Latin American variety shows, U.S. network TV dramas, and anime—now circulate on portable hard-drives and USB sticks. This distribution system exists alongside Cuba's state-controlled media and is tolerated by the authorities. Drawing on interviews and field observation, Pertierra offers a fascinating account of the workings of this parallel infrastructure, so firmly integrated into the lives of young Cubans.

One of the world's largest informal media economies is the Nigerian video industry (Nollywood), which produces around a thousand films a year without the benefit of state funding, studio infrastructure, or festival support. Alessandro Jedlowski's article considers the aesthetic and industrial relations between film, television, and video in Nigeria. In an original contribution to the Nollywood debate, Jedlowski reads Nollywood as a “small-screen cinema” uniquely suited to the political economy from which it emerges—a media system that is “accessible, interstitial and informal in its

modes of production, portable in its materiality, communal in its modes of exhibition, difficult to regulate and thus accidentally political in its circulation.”

As Stuart Cunningham’s article demonstrates, comparable formal–informal relations are at work in online video distribution. Video-hosting sites like YouTube must now manage user uploads of diverse material (amateur videos, unauthorized film/TV clips, remixes, tributes, professional content) while toeing the line of copyright enforcement. Cunningham considers the emerging forms of innovation at work within this environment, focusing on Google’s Content ID system and on case studies of Australian digital content producers. His incisive analysis reveals some of the “sources of innovation and renewal” emerging from these increasingly complex and multi-centric media ecologies.

Finally, we offer a roundtable interview with a team of researchers who have been involved in a groundbreaking study of informal media distribution. *Media Piracy in Emerging Economies* (Karaganis 2011) explores the dynamics of software, film, and music piracy in India, Russia, Mexico, Bolivia, Brazil, and South Africa. On the occasion of the report’s publication, we took the opportunity to chat with key members of the research team about the practical challenges of studying media piracy at ground level. We hope that this conversation may be useful for scholars and anyone else interested in the politics of intellectual property, the drama of enforcement, and the paradoxes of global media pricing.

The various economies analyzed here encompass production, distribution, and consumption; they connect with established media systems in surprising ways; they span the legal and extralegal realms; and they range from tightly organized to amorphous and anarchic. Approaching these objects from multiple directions, our contributors together help to reveal what Castells and Portes call the “variable geometry” (1989, 26) of formal–informal relations—the many ways in which “industry” and off-the-books activity interact and intersect—within increasingly complex media environments.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The financial support of the Australian Research Council (Discovery Project scheme) and the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (International Science Linkages-Humanities and Creative Arts Programme) and the Australian Academy of the Humanities is gratefully acknowledged.

Note

1. This special issue is the product of an international workshop – Piracy and Informal Media Economies, held at Swinburne University of Technology in March 2011 – where drafts of the research articles were first presented. We thank the nineteen participants for their

valuable contributions and feedback. The financial support of the Australian government's International Science Linkages-Humanities and Creative Arts Programme, administered by the Australian Academy of the Humanities, is gratefully acknowledged.

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Bios

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