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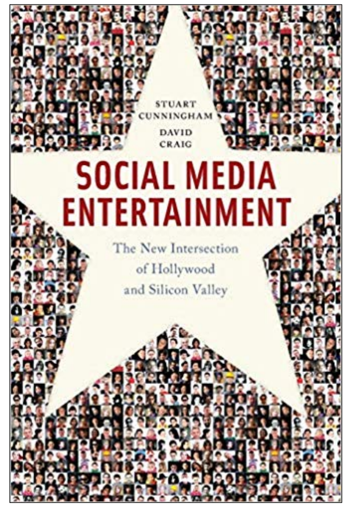
Stuart Cunningham and David Craig, **Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley**, 2019, New York, NY: New York University Press, 353 pp., $89.00 (hardcover), $30.00 (paperback).



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If you are following the exploits of PewDiePie, watching apology videos with a curiosity about authenticity, charting community in Twitch gameplay, or trying to decide whether unboxing is addicting kids to consumerism, you are in the part of comm studies paying attention to social media entertainment (SME). And you need this book: ***Social Media Entertainment: The New Intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley***.

Actually, you also might need this book if you are studying television or the growth of Netflix/Amazon/Hulu or other more traditional media. Because Stuart Cunningham and David Craig have developed a deeply informed, theoretically contextualized set of arguments that come to this: SME is shaking up the media landscape. It is early in the game, and pretty messy, but there is something new here.

Cunningham is a veteran scholar at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), who has evolved the concept of creative industries studies and also helped shape cultural policy in his native Australia. David Craig is a veteran television producer, ex-programming executive at two cable networks, and Emmy nominee, who now teaches at the University of Southern California. (Nota bene: Cunningham and QUT hosted my Fulbright research fellowship two years ago, where I also met Craig. However, our research did not overlap.) They both deeply understand industry economics and how to extrapolate its implications. Here, political economy meets cultural studies, grounded in current data. They interviewed dozens of makers and executives, plunged into the trade press, and attended business conferences internationally to build up the picture they present. And they found they were in the midst of a ferment of inquiry. In late 2017, they ran a Google search on "dissertation," "Instagram," and "beauty" and found more than a thousand results.

They argue that in SME, Hollywood (SoCal) meets Silicon Valley (NoCal) with unpredictable and unstable results. Hollywood's entire business model depends upon controlling copyrights. That is why the Motion Picture Association of America distributes dubious "educational" materials to K–12 students about the moral outrage of copying (Gillespie, 2009) and why the Recording Industry Association of America sued its own customers in the heyday of downloading (Sinnreich, 2013). Silicon Valley, by contrast, lives on endlessly iterating automated technology that serves users and, even better, the advertisers who want to connect with them.

SME—the livestreamed gameplay, the unboxing and fashion tutorials on YouTube, the lifestyle vlogs—lives precariously between the two models. It is content, but it floats around the Internet freely. The platforms that host it hold no copyrights on it (they are making money from advertising), and by and large, content providers do not find it in their interest to keep their viewers from access. That is because the real drivers of SME are communication and community; the content is all a means to that end. And as Nancy Baym (2018), Alice Marwick (2013), and others have noted, that means creators have an exhausting, never-ending job of making new friends while keeping all their old ones, combining the social and economic by monetizing relationships.

Their close look at this emerging ecology lets them see beyond sweeping claims about the overweening power of the new NoCal lords of the universe. This is not to deny the broad implications of surveillance capitalism, as Shoshana Zuboff (2018) notes, or the sour warnings of social control and privacy invasion of Evgeny Morozov's body of work. But at the level of SME, they do not see inevitability, or even easy business choices. Rather, they see what Lash and Urry (1987) call "disorganized capitalism." They note that there is both rivalry and interdependency between NoCal and SoCal models and economic actors. Network effects do indeed create lock-in, but they also create spaces where unexpected things happen. Platforms create affordances, and creators torque them for unforeseen purposes. Businesses merge, split, fail. NoCal's YouTube tries to commission original professional content with YouTube Red and cannot figure it out. SoCal tries to make original content to fit social media and cannot make it work. Birthing a new media form is harder than you think.

The creators earn some revenue from advertising—but these days less and less, with more and more content competing for eyeballs, more content moderation, and endless surprises from AI-driven algorithmic changes. They also do merch, virtual gifts, live performances, fan sites and events, and option or sell their work (scripts, series, even a novel) to traditional media. These are all SoCal strategies. There is surprisingly little crossover, though, between traditional media and SME. Traditional media is about the media; SME is about the community.

Creators are much more empowered, they argue, in this environment than in Hollywood or even the high-end streaming environment. The platforms need them, and they have options. They are even being served by intermediaries, the so-called multichannel networks that spread their work across the social media landscape strategically and new data analytics firms. But the ecology is fast, fickle, and adaptive, hewing to the NoCal iterative model. Careers that depend on personality and outrageousness can go south quickly. Creators find that their Facebook friends are writing them tomes, which can be anguishing as well as time consuming to read. The community is also all over; 80 percent of YouTube's traffic is outside the United States. They cannot trust the platforms not to change the terms and conditions overnight, and opaquely. Meanwhile, the analytics they get are mostly unhelpful; this is high-touch, emotionally intensive work. If the creators are living in precarity, their intermediaries are even more so.

As many others have done before them, which they duly note and analyze, Cunningham and Craig position authenticity as central to the building of community. The unprofessionalism of SME is a choice; most creators are trying not to look professional but "a little bit better" than the people watching them, posing as peers while looking for customers. But the authors push back against other scholars who describe this monetized relationship work in purely negative terms. They see a self-aware acceptance among makers of the blurred line between the "authentic" and "commodity" self and some spirit of rebellion against the more closed SoCal world. Even media stars like PewDiePie pay a terrible price when they are caught being mercenary. Makers of coming-out videos turn off advertising when they launch them. Creators who take on brands, which can only happen after they establish a community, are hypervigilant about alignment with their community's values and expectations of them.

Sometimes the effort to complexify seems a little stretched, though. I had trouble with their argument (p. 271) that critiques of kids' unboxing videos for exploiting children both as creators and viewers are overblown, because families experience them as family businesses and an entrepreneurial adventure. Clearly it is more useful to know the experience of creators, though, in trying to understand the phenomenon.

SME, the authors find, is currently far more racially plural, multicultural, and gender diverse than SoCal media. There are also culturally political communities in it as well as evidence of political awareness among creators who otherwise do not strive for social justice. They interview Asian American creators, some of whom gradually grow into a sense of responsibility for representation, and others who come with that agenda. They look at lesbian, gay, and trans makers, and the rituals of the coming-out video as both a community-building moment and also an expansion of expression. It was particularly interesting for me to read about how creators gradually came to take more open and articulate social and political positions as they grew their online presence. The claim in this chapter is not that SME is a hotbed of revolutionary social change—the "It's Get Better" campaign, in particular, is flagged for being racial and class conditioned. Rather, it is a diverse and new cultural space of expression, still in its early youth.

After a U.S.-centric analysis of SME, the authors touch lightly on the vastly differing experiences of SME around the globe. China, of course, astonishes with its state-protected platforms that occupy the space that Facebook, Google, and Twitter do in the United States, with vaster audiences, extraordinary monetization tools, and a fascinating livestreaming business that has no comparables elsewhere. Indian SME affords upscale professionals an alternative to staid and standard popular media. German SME occurs within an ever-growing thicket of regulation that responds to German cultural concerns as well as state interests.

All this means, the authors argue, that traditional analysis of "media imperialism" does not fit whatever this emerging phenomenon is turning out to be. It is platform based, but not necessarily platform dependent. It is extraordinarily different in different places. The expression is grassroots and can only succeed by winning popular support.

This book is, the authors agree, trying to catch lightning in a bottle. This is a moment, and public policy is coming. Regulators have woken up to techlash and will do something. They will do it differently in different places. Everyone will invoke "the children" to push for their interests. The solutions will not meet the problems. But scholars suddenly have a real role to play in explaining these issues.

They argue that public policy should focus on protecting the interests of creators. That indeed is the reason they chose to avoid calling them more industry-common terms such as "influencers." They want creators, who are both entrepreneurs and workers, to see themselves as a distinct category.

Creators have never had much real protection in the creative industries. In SoCal, they rarely own the copyrights for their work, and between the personalism of production decisions (hello, Harvey Weinstein) and the wonders of creative accounting, their contracts do not often do them much good. Meanwhile, NoCal has developed an unparalleled opacity in its operations, so that users of all kinds have no idea how they are being used.

The authors point to some policies that would benefit creators as much as everyone else, such as net neutrality and some kind of algorithmic transparency. (I would throw in national health insurance.) They also point to some governments' active cultural support for online streaming media creators. Finally, they look to creators to self-organize, as some have, for instance, in the Internet Creators Guild. The Vlogbrothers, Hank and John Green, who are self-consciously social activists, are for the authors important thought leaders of this emerging community.

There is a disciplined standard format for each chapter: premise, literature review, experiential storytelling, and analytic summary. Among other things, this makes the book valuable as a resource for current literature on these topics. Since the authors read as well outside communication studies, the literature reviews often make useful connections into political economy, economics, and political science. Finally, the writing, while sometimes dry and well within expectations for academic prose, is clear and unpretentious.

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