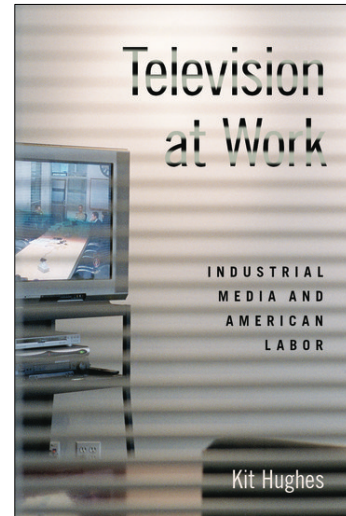


Kit Hughes, **Television at Work: Industrial Media and American Labor**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020, 304 pp., \$39.95 (paperback).

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This book, **Television at Work: Industrial Media and American Labor**, is a detailed history of using television in the American workplace. Author Kit Hughes addresses a growing scholarly audience concern with the relationship between increasingly precarious work and the increasing media penetration of all life aspects, skillfully contributing to the study of the relationship between media and post-Fordist labor practices. It is a unique perspective that correlates work with media usage, which can suggest and sometimes demonstrates causal relationships between the two spheres. The book is thoroughly grounded in cultural studies and is of interest to sociologists, labor historians, media scholars, and cultural theorists. Hughes is an original writer whose rigorous historical research took her into the archives of several corporations as well as conducting interviews with veterans of business TV dating back four decades.



She uses frames and concepts that were developed in relation to leisure and home usage, such as empowerment and flow, and asks the reader to consider them anew in the work situation. The first chapter is about American business using electronic communication and film in the century before television. In this early period, business was already using media to deskill labor, such as filming Frederick Taylor's time and motion studies. There was also the commercial temptation to invade the home with work by using communication devices such as the fax machine. Hughes introduces the contrast between coordination and cultivation functions of business media. Coordination is the practical function, such as telegraphing train positions to efficiently and safely use railroad tracks. Cultivation (with a nod to Gerbner and Gross's prior use of the term) has a more cultural connotation of motivating workers to adopt more profitable practices. Each medium, ranging from telegraph to radio and film, has a bias toward one of the others. Hughes is too smart to separate the two absolutely and at various points in her summary of media history astutely points out when one function slides into the other, particularly as we move into the age of video.

Television combines the timeliness of radio with vision, leading to prosthetic breakthroughs such as remotely monitoring and manipulating dangerous chemicals and other processes. This begins to have more social implications since such remote monitoring can reduce the need for a skilled work force as well as extend the physical dimensions of the workplace to a transnational level. I am not sure we add much by linking this remote manipulation to the concept of flow, but we are on firmer ground when Hughes moves on to the cultivation power of television. An eye-opening statement is that "television's ability to transform an audience into a 'family' and manage employee-employer relationships would become a hallmark of its promotion" (p. 104). She documents how various business motivational and training programs used

television's immediacy to project an aesthetic of sincerity and a message of accessibility from management to employees.

These uses deepened with the 1970's use of videotape and other electronic formats. Hughes pays particular attention to the short-lived EVR video system (Hughes limits it to 11 months in the United States circa 1970). Although its intended market was home entertainment, its only usage before the system was abandoned was in industrial and educational settings. This pattern was again and more successfully used in the development of video cassettes when Sony and other manufacturers had their first breakthrough in business and schools with the three-quarter-inch U-matic, followed by the creation of the home entertainment market with the half-inch Betamax and VHS formats. The implied point is that business usage helped shape entertainment and cultural usages. Hughes also amplifies the argument made by others that the video revolution coincides with and responds to the increasing demands of post-Fordist labor with the rise of flex work time and the stress of two employed parents. She observes that video helped corporations to comply with new antidiscrimination laws. It was an inexpensive way to train new nontraditional employees who lacked needed skills because they had previously been locked out.

Chapter 5 continues the story up until the advent of the Internet by looking at business use of satellites to distribute their video messages both for the purposes of coordination and cultivation. Thus business TV becomes a part of the globalization process and perhaps even contributes to the weakening of national bonds. Hughes writes, "Companies also attempted to redirect workers' affective bonds away from the nation and toward the firm [in the 1970s and afterwards]" (p. 169). She concludes her book with an innovative acknowledgement section that, in addition to the typical shout out to colleagues, friends, and family, also details the level of cooperation she received from some companies and practitioners and the restrictions others placed on her access. This is becoming a phenomenon confronting critical scholars and should be documented. While on this topic, I wish to complain that Oxford University Press made a poor decision not to include a bibliography, which hampers the reader pursuing Hughes's extensive and admirable citation of sources.

I think the unstated problem that hovers above this and similar studies is the degradation of work, and consequently the degradation of democracy, in the current neoliberal phase of the postwar era. Media usages contribute to both degradations. Hughes documents how the potentials of media constantly narrowed down to corporate desires. She knows the relevant literature and quotes a range from macro theorists to micro historians with equal facility. Her unique focus on television in the workplace forced me to confront my own critical interest in video and Hollywood. Although I remain satisfied that linking entertainment and storytelling to technologies of distribution does illuminate the determinants of our shared cultural representations, I am impressed that Hughes's perspective suggests parallel patterns of audience formations. She contributes to the realization that the corporate formatting of television has taken TV's creation of an ersatz family a step further to where TV (and the Internet) has no compunction about treating even the audiences for its entertainments as employees.