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21st Century Televisuality? Golden Ages and Collateral Damage in Industry Stress Research

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Abstract

This article examines how the innovations of, and fallout from, the post-1980s US multichannel cable era both prefigured and were transformed by the 21st-century online platform streaming era. Intense corporate competition, in which traditional networks and studios collided with disruptive new firms, triggered producers to innovate new ways of financing, making, and conceptualizing media content. Both disruptions spurred mergers, bankruptcies, hostile takeovers, and collapsing institutional distinctions. At the same time, these periods of acute market uncertainty also triggered widespread forms of innovation in production, technical imaging, narrative content, seriality, programming strategies, and aesthetics. So much so that the periods have been deemed "The 2nd Golden Age of Television," and a "European Television Fiction Renaissance," respectively. Yet traditional qualitative paradigms like these can also divert scholars who intend or need to unpack, document, and explain two more modest industry realities. First, acute televisual stylizing and golden age attributions gloss over television's and streaming's less-remarkable but essential and problematic industrial routine. Second, celebrating industrial exceptionalisms often ignore the creative media workers that disruptive innovations inevitably displace; or they caricature routine workers as a monotonous "rule" that proves the talented rise-above-the-pack "exception." I have tried to look beyond the vanguard masterworks in the two historical disruptions. My research focuses on habitual practices in production, in order to unpack the collateral damage, the "industrial ashes" that "media peaks" and masterpieces often (necessarily) arise from. Fieldwork and human-subjects research in media industry studies make it difficult to overlook the human costs and displaced workers that have followed in the wake of aesthetic and technical innovations in both periods. Drawing on the ethnographic fieldwork for *Specworld* (Caldwell, 2023), this article targets one problem scholars unavoidably face if they hope to account for the habitual, the losers, and the routine in worlds of production. Taking this approach makes justifying one methodological framework a precondition for scholarship: the *scope* of the evidence or data media scholars intend to "sample" in research on the immense complex production systems that characterize both periods.

As an alternative to the bracketed-off masterworks, "quality television" (or "cinemas"), and auteurs favored by arts and humanities scholars, research on complex media ecosystems requires finding a system-wide logic or basis for the evidence gathered. I argue that production rifts and fractures offer scholars unintended (unplanned and uncensored) self-portraits of what complex industries "betray" as most important to the system as a whole. In proposing "rift-trace data-sampling" for evidence I argue that industrial failures (rather than masterworks) act as unintended, even subconscious disclosures of key industrial practices. Triggered disclosures of this sort may offer a more convincing way to understand the televisual complexities—and system-wide functions—of golden-age digital innovations.

1. Introduction

Media worker survivor accounts of barely "hanging-on" financially in 2024 echoed painfully after the media trades declared the collapse of "Peak TV" in 2022. Michael Wylie, an unemployed production worker waiting to be rehired for work on *Avatar: The Last Airbender* summed up the widespread pessimism: "We just came out of the second golden age of television and now we're in a wasteland….I have 25 years of experience at a high-level. Don't throw me on the heap just yet" (Keeps, 2024, p. E7). Interpreting production's widening labor depression, the Hollywood trades called out the culprit as none other than Netflix, which a few years earlier was praised for having triggered a decades-long boom in Hollywood's over-production of screen content. This well-funded new online competitor, in turn, alarmed TV and old media management into over-producing and over-financing their own quality content to compete with the new "streamers." That over-production continued apace, until Netflix saw its first quarterly subscriber loss in 2022. A precipitous drop in stock prices and scripted TV followed, along with series shutdowns and project-killing industry-wide labor strikes in 2023. Subsequent mergers and the layoffs of thousands of professional workers in 2024 drove the final nail into the coffin of streaming's Peak TV Golden Era in the US. At least for A-list Hollywood and its unions, the threat to livelihoods in the gig economy was ominous. As unemployed production designer David Blass from *Star Trek: Picard* cynically lamented in 2024: "Most people have been hanging on by their fingernails, and they're running out of fingernails. I know Emmy Award winners who are driving around delivering auto parts" (Keeps, 2024, p. E7).

An A-list era of Peak TV had arisen in Europe as well, but key differences are apparent, along with some striking parallels between the qualitative media peaks underway on both continents. As Barra and Scaglioni (2021) described, the 21st century media renaissance in Europe started not with Netflix and its competitors, but through major pay-TV competitors during the pre-streaming era. In addition, even though European production for streamers does now parallel the A-list content and screen-quality of America's recent TV/streaming golden ages, Europe's route to peak screen quality came about via even more transnational and decentralized means. European peak production, that is, was unevenly spread across the continent, in more diverse and geographically complicated co-financing and co-production arrangements.

2. Academia's Peaking Disposition

The peaks-and-valleys paradigm for culture is a centuries-old disposition in arts and humanities scholarship. In those academic traditions, two general practices incentivize the peaks-and-golden-ages approach. Academia's dark-ages-to-Renaissance framing (cycles of unexceptional norms vs. periods of exceptional quality) often follows from either: (a) a critical-curatorial posture in the humanities (film historians and critics cull formal evidence to showcase qualitative exceptions or establish canons via interpretive rhetorical argument); or (b) a juried-sourcing social science posture in media studies (journals employ blind peer review among specialist colleagues to establish exemplary media exceptions and quality cases that have disciplinary or industrial significance).

Before looking further into the scholarly and critical appraisal of the two 21st-century televisual media peaks highlighted in this essay (i.e., the Netflix-era-streaming-rise-and-fall described in Section 1, and the vast worldwide expansion of YouTube during its utopian Golden Age, pre-2017, examined in Section 5), an earlier media industry-disrupting precedent provides useful lessons for scholars as we try to understand 21st-century media peaks/renaissances and their aftermaths. I want, that is, to bring into view how the post-1980 "televisual" multichannel cable era in the US both prefigured and was transformed by the 21st century online Peak TV streaming era. In this 1980s production peak prototype, intense corporate competition, in which traditional networks and studios collided with disruptive new firms, triggered producers to innovate new ways of financing, making, and conceptualizing media content. This disruption spurred mergers, bankruptcies, hostile takeovers, and collapsing institutional distinctions. However, like other periods of acute market uncertainty, deregulation and increased competition triggered widespread forms of innovation in production, technical imaging, narrative content, seriality, programming strategies, and aesthetics. So much so that the earlier televisual period has been deemed "The 2nd Golden Age of Television" (Thompson, 1997). This historical framing in the US echoes the peak streaming era carefully researched and persuasively articulated as a "European Television Fiction Renaissance" (Barra & Scaglioni, 2021). Both framings located key factors and emerging conditions that earlier media critics and historians had overlooked or disregarded. Yet, if we look further into the industries described by these qualitative appraisals and golden age paradigms, scholars will likely run into industrial practices that do not easily fit within these frameworks. In the next pages, I want to unpack, document, and explain two more modest industry realities.

First, golden age attributions tend to look beyond television's and streaming's less-remarkable but essential and problematic *industrial routine*. Second, the industry's aesthetic exceptionalisms often ignore difficult *labor downsides*—including the below-the-line workers that disruptive innovations often displace. Or peak framing can implicitly presuppose that routine workers function as a monotonous "rule" that proves the rise-above-the-pack "exception." I cannot wash my hands of the scholarly oversights I have just critiqued, since my first book, *Televisuality* (Caldwell, 1995) fits the very industrial renaissance framing just described. Since that time, however, I have tried to look beyond the vanguard masterworks, more closely, at the two historical disruptions (1980s multichannel cable, and 2010s streaming). My research now focuses more on habitual practices in production, in order to unpack the collateral damage, the "industrial ashes" that masterpieces often (necessarily) arise from. Fieldwork and human-subjects research in media industry studies make it difficult to overlook the human costs and displaced workers that have followed in the wake of aesthetic and technical innovations in both periods.

Drawing on the ethnographic fieldwork for *Production Culture* (Caldwell, 2008) and *Specworld* (Caldwell, 2023), I target in this article one problem that scholars unavoidably face, if they hope to account for the habitual, the losers, the routine in ethnography. My fieldwork in these two books has forced me to better justify one methodological framework as a precondition for scholarship: the *scope* of the evidence or data media scholars intend to "sample" in research. This is especially challenging given the immensity of the complex production systems that characterize both the 1980s and 2010s periods. As an alternative to the bracketed-off masterworks, "quality television" (or "cinemas"), and auteurs favored by arts and humanities scholars, research on complex media ecosystems requires finding a system-wide logic or basis for the evidence gathered and framed-off for research, as I will detail in the pages that follow.

3. Industry's Peaking Disposition

The historiographic roller-coaster that media historians often create—framing off high peaks of creative accomplishment from periods of unexceptional routine—may spill over and serve the industry's very real short-term needs to find and lock down either company "best practices" or profitable, reproducible high-quality "prototypes" allowing them to survive highly-competitive, always-changing, media marketplaces. The industry and its executives have never waited on insights from scholars before taking on such risks or making strategic changes. Far from it. The impulse to isolate and to convince others of quality media "peaks" is not unique to academia. Media industries also have a long history and an institutional need to assert quality "peaks" for two reasons that have little to do with "aesthetics" in the classical sense of the word. First, all of modern marketing, promotion, and branding start from the necessary premise that a marketing campaign only succeeds to the extent that it can establish in the trade public's mind that the show, series, brand, or film is significantly different from all other films, studios, networks, or figures competing in that specific market or cycle. Artificially concocting distinction (or semiotic difference) is in fact a foundational imperative within consumer capitalism. No media marketing ever succeeds by selling a film, series, or company as blandly ubiquitous; or as no different than others in the same market.

Second, beyond any studio's individual requirement to spin and sell distinction, the industry invents media peaks as a more collective managerial strategy. That is, a media peak, once established in the trades, will ideally become less costly and more formulaic (i.e., profitable). That is, developing cutting-edge media is typically risky and expensive, but profitability requires that the studio in question must lock down and reduce the look/edge/trend into a less expensive (or at least more predictable) standardized formula to cut costs and allow wider financial returns, at least in the near term. Showcasing a media peak can become a marketing benchmark and production/distribution strategy for the (initially) risk-tolerant individual innovator. Organizationally, however, successfully exploiting and perpetuating media peaks often means finding production efficiencies for the new peak and then making that innovation routine—and thus monetizable—over the longer term.

With two caveats, first, acknowledging key distinctions between American and European media industries (described in Section 1), and, second, recognizing the contrasting disciplinary impact of diverging American and European research funding practices (discussed in Section 6), I hope, in this short essay, to reflect on some relevant ideas about research methods. These ideas pivot around questions of distinction and quality, which are adapted from fieldwork for my recent book *Specworld* (Caldwell, 2023), and are followed here with some reflections on the results of that ethnographic research. The approaches I take come from a career of

trying to research how and why aesthetic and technical innovation takes place in film and media industries at some points and not others. I have, that is, been unable to fully escape the qualitative shadow and mission of aesthetics (given my educational and professional origins in the arts). Yet at the same time, the sometimes vexing evidence on the ground in fieldwork has forced me to explain innovation and quality as the result of more complex and messy matters that go far beyond creator intention, formal accomplishment, and "quality" screen-content benchmarks. In short, my ethnographic fieldwork has forced me to deal as well with the infrastructure and human dark sides of the organizational systems needed to produce exceptional creative works, canons, and/or signature auteurs.

As I have recently argued, periods of innovation are inseparable from the system-wide stressors and rifts that produce them. Accordingly, the key to researching exemplary media inevitably requires looking at embedded system-wide behaviors of the media industry. That system-behavior approach requires justifying a researcher's scope of evidence based not on how the researcher selects evidence, but on how an embedded industrial system unintentionally "selects" evidence that is nevertheless, by definition, highly significant. "Data" disclosed in such "sets" are significant precisely because the industry or company no longer controls its data when faced with acute inter-trade and intra-trade rifts and fractures. Losing control of the trade informational system in this way undercuts the executive pillars that inform both corporate and brand management. Stressed industrial rifts, that is, often trigger a flood of antagonistic, multivariant (diverse) but nevertheless a highly-significant (intensely connected) forms of evidence (for the research sample or data set).

In the pages that follow, and given word-limits, I will start by introducing three concise examples of industrial stress points and fractures, offered here as brief illustrations: labor outsourcing, litigation over costly on-set lapses, and (in the conclusion) the labor threats from AI and onset virtual production. I have unpacked these examples and practices in much greater depth elsewhere (Caldwell, 2023). Building on these short illustrations, I will then elaborate more fully on another example, which I offer here as a more developed case study for this article. My primary focus, in that case, is on an inter-trade industrial fracture during one "media peak" in the rise of online social media platforms, known as the "Adpocalypse." I will then describe how the YouTube/Google ecosystem "managed" this uprising by its online creators (ostensible "partners"), and how the host firms eventually regained control of, and covered over, their creator uprising and fracture.

This case study of an industrial fracture in the online creator system, detailed in Section 5, provided a multi-scale data set of evidence that I researched through fieldwork, and then analysis, from 2016–2017. The Adpocalypse arose within what was arguably a "peak" era of expansion and success for online social media creators. YouTube (and its phalanx of formal, informal, and contingent affiliates) had to work hard during this crisis to regain control of systemwide creator volatility in what YouTube marketing had heretofore imagined as a sunny, reciprocal, and unified "media ecosystem." What had agitated the creators? YouTube's hidden algorithm had just secretly and abruptly defunded YouTube's own "partner" creators—through "de-monetization"—without any warning or explanation. Even before YouTube's official PR attempts to regain control, to win back its ocean of once-loyal but now angry content creators, the platform churned with a flurry of unsanctioned info from a multitude of (non-corporate) perspectives. I chose to frame this flood of diverse data issuing from an industrial fracture (much of it antagonistic)—centering its nexus point around a single day with a week-long trade show. I chose this period and location to build out an industrial rhizome or "network snap-shot," which I employed as my data sample. The evidence map that resulted was rhizomatic

and dynamic. It spotlighted both inter-firm crisis management and efforts by YouTube to realign creator behavior on the platform, with its brand.

Given this essay's word limits, and before returning in more depth to the Adpocalypse, I want to set the stage by offering two concise examples to illustrate several key research concepts in my method. Both of these examples are offered to define and underscore the productive possibilities of what I term "rift-trace-sampling"; that is, as a way to systematically handle and examine evidence in a media industry researcher's data set. For simplicity, in the following paragraphs, I will use the synonym "peak media" to signify what other scholars (including myself) may characterize as a media "golden age," "renaissance," "televisuality," "peak streaming," and/or "quality TV."

4. Industry Rifts and Fractures

4.1. Locating an Embedded Industrial Rift That is Researchable

Locating, framing, and describing a researchable industrial rift challenges the researcher in the early stages of a project to better conceptualize the subjects and entities that aggregate to comprise the media industry in question. Media industries excel when they cover-over their many internal differences to create a unified illusion of consensus in the trades. The same industries when threatened or stressed, however, can trigger their normally compliant workers into disclosures of damning "inside" information. These push-backs and leaks by workers provide openings into much larger and often problematic networks of interactions, that can be taken-up as research starting points. As one example, the worldwide shift to outsourced, subsidized, and flexible "off-shore" production labor triggered industry crises in many dominant film and media production centers. In 2012, workers and activists gathered in solidarity to pushback against Italy's legendary national Cinecitta film studios outside of Rome (see Figure 1). They launched the labor action to protest the studio's

Figure 1. Cinecitta' Okkupata labor protest, Italy (photo by John T. Caldwell, 2012).

downsizing and partial commercial redevelopment planned by management. Stressed fault-lines, like this one, during streaming media's highly profitable peak era triggered labor blowback in the film industry—even as (or because) the studios and networks involved continued to produce "quality" A-list screen content. The unsanctioned, often-critical back-channel info leaked and outed by workers about the industry challenged long-standing labor norms. The public rift also flagged suspect system-wide behavior in the complex industrial ecosystem that scholars could sample. Together with management's counter-attempts to resolve the dysfunction, the triggered flood of industry info provided a thick web of traceable connected evidence that could serve as a researcher's "data set."

Of course, using leaked, hacked, or back-channel disclosures by below-the-line workers (like those at Cinecitta Okkupata) can produce ethical predicaments for scholars—as well as even more (unintended) precarity for the creative worker/informant. As the next example will show, forced employee NDA's (non-disclosure agreements) and power imbalances (between management and workers or scholars) in the corporate sphere can greatly skew the ideal industry–scholar relationship. Yet, this potential institutional hostility does not mean that traditional protection of human subjects protocols and anonymizing informants are no longer relevant. Far from it. But changing the scale of evidence can mitigate the inability to employ traditional Internal Review Board protections. In particular, finding parallel corporate deep-texts and trade artifacts (Caldwell, 2008) to confirm findings and/or substitute for human subjects' quotes are more crucial for the scholar than ever. Accessing corporate or trade deep-texts through informants can prove equally (or even more) damning as critiques of the labor precarity managed by executives, than isolated anecdotes from individual workers. The Okkupata case forces the scholar to find ways to ethically study the struggles of individuals in precarious situations—even as the researcher traces out the cloaked internal networks that animate those struggles. The Okkupata case also underscores the necessity of system-based thinking, since the combination of sources I am proposing can actually help make problems visible that would otherwise not be addressed in interviews alone. In the next example of a researchable rift, unlike Cinecitta, studio management was largely stripped of its ability to control a different kind of industry's rift, or cover over production labor casualties.

4.2. Peak System Fracture That Executives Were Unable to Cover-Up

Litigious and prosecutorial disclosures represent another type of researchable fracture (see Figure 2). As I detail elsewhere (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 224–225), and elaborate in the next three paragraphs:

> This is because court cases involving production entities almost always result in the creation and distribution of written descriptions of actual onset practices, attributable quotes, and literal debates that dramatize that studios and networks are nothing like the cohesive monolithic brands they are marketed as.

Studios would never give access or permission to scholars—let alone to their own employees because of worker NDAs (Non-Disclosure Agreements)—to disclose the kind of inside proprietary information about the studio, that courts can legally force. Sarah Jones, a 27-year-old AC (assistant camera) crewmember was killed while working on a Jessup, Georgia filming location for the feature *Midnight Special* on February 20, 2014. Her on-set death:

Exposed deep structural problems that had long been normalized and covered over by the production system as a whole. News that a CSX train plowed through the crew on-location on a bridge, killing Jones and injuring eight other crew members spread through organized labor media. A "We Are All Sarah Jones" movement quickly spread—visibly and symbolically—to other sets and productions across the industry.

Union social media jumped on the terrible news as crewmembers across the industry echoed and amplified the labor rift over producer negligence extensively in the trades. Law enforcement arrested and jailed producer Randall Miller, while the district attorney indicted three associates on voluntary manslaughter charges and criminal trespass. This felony prosecution was just the beginning. The production company itself, Film Allman, filed a lawsuit against its insurer New York Marine, since the underwriter refused to cover the company's financial crisis when the film project as a whole was closed down.

This prosecutorial and litigious fracture opened to daylight many otherwise back-channel industry debates about dangerous and pernicious production labor practices and management short-cuts. In effect,

Figure 2. The "We Are All Sarah Jones" on-set protests sweep across other productions. Notes: AC Jones' tragic on-set death triggers both felony indictments and civil cases against the producers and production company; as shown in the above photo montage from publicized court documents, OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Agency) reports, mug shots, location photos, slate solidarity messages, and crew protests on social media (photo by John T. Caldwell, 2018).

juridical intervention into Jones' tragic avoidable, on-set death worked to dis-embed production labor practices to scholars and the public alike. This forced breaching of "inside" information churned through four downstream channels:

> (a) social media creation and on-set activism by peer workers; (b) a criminal case, which produced 86 photos, recreations, and video analyses of the train trestle, along with investigative reports from OSHA and the department of labor...; (c) the considerable advocacy trade chatter documents that circulated in and around the civil trial by one legal firm or the other; and (d) trade publications. *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter* provided timely play-by-play reports on the fallout.

Industry trades are often the scholars' primary method for gaining access to production info. But beyond that, if triggered by legal fractures, the researcher can access other unscripted responses—oblique behind-the-scenes communiques, visual documents, activism onset, and social media trolling—much of it richer as evidence.

The rich array of deep texts and artifacts revealed much about labor conditions (long hours and precarity) and the habit of producers to take unnecessary shortcuts for budgetary reasons. Systems thinking helps us more effectively triangulate among all of these registers. The diversity of evidence dislodged in the Sarah Jones tragedy provides scholars a much more dimensional view of the deep links and webs of labor contestation that make up adjacent strata of embedded production sectors.

"Such shutdowns out and then freeze relationships in the public record. In effect, the courts that intervene publicize then embed the shoot's various coproduction relationships in study-able amber" (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 224–225). In effect, this on-location fracture and its judicial push-back gave scholars both a starting-point to sample evidence, and a complex freeze-frame of the many firms and sub-companies that presided over the disaster, including insurers, state film commissions, and government tax subsidies.

5. Online Creator Renaissance vs. Adpocalypse

5.1. Peak Online Media Rift That YouTube Tried to Manage/Defuse (Case Study: The "Adpocalypse")

The on-set tragedy and loss of AC Sarah Jones represents just the tip of the rift-disclosure iceberg in the production trade news cycle.

Labor accidents, lawsuits, indictments are part of the rift-disclosure info pool in production's trade news-cycle. I examine here (in more detail) a recent, larger-scale example of a continuing rift and scarp, specifically the "Adpocalypse" that shuddered through the utopian golden age of YouTube starting in 2017. In effect, YouTube changed the algorithm by which it ranked and recommended newly uploaded videos to other users (Figure 3). Most of the ethnographic subjects I talked with (2017-2019) viewed the Adpocalypse's defunding of their YouTube channels as:

> A major threat to their prospects for "scaling-up" or increased success on the platform. Since YouTube had earlier celebrated that it was "partnering" to share ad revenues with rising and successful YouTubers, the fact that the platform might no longer prioritize one's uploads as highly as it once did felt like an existential threat. YouTube's Partner Program now only shared ad revenues with YouTuber channels that

had one thousand subscribers and four thousand watched hours in the previous 12 months. (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 231–232)

Creators complained widely that without warning YouTube's had unfairly moved the goalposts for their supposed "partnerships." This jeopardized the long-odds promise that creators would eventually have successful careers.

Figure 3. To protest the Adpocalypse, content creators threatened YouTube with "down-in-flames" videos, anti-NDA missives against multichannel networks, and "quitting YouTube" uploads (photo illustration by John T. Caldwell, 2017).

YouTube derailed even its good creators/influencers with its unanticipated and unwanted demonetization:

[This] was especially troubling to aspiring creators who had planned to launch and build their careers around a growing subscriber base linked to automated monetization on the platform. Some YouTubers complained that their revenues had been cut to a fraction of their earlier income. Others complained that their new video uploads simply "disappeared" and were now never ranked or seldom liked. What perplexed many was that YouTube never provided an adequate explanation or description with any specifics about how and why it had altered the algorithm. After the change, YouTube made excuses, claiming that it now had to "flag" and "demonetize" racist and lewd videos uploaded by bad actors. Yet beyond that, YouTube simply posted sunny, vague announcements saying that it would constantly adjust the algorithm in the future to "improve" [its] helpful ranking and recommendation system. (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 231–232)

For many aspiring creators, YouTube's platform posturing (i.e., business as usual, only somehow "better"):

> [They] felt used and foolish, since they had (naively) assumed that they had been building a loyal financial partnership with the platform that was reciprocal. After the Adpocalypse, many remained unpersuaded and resentful. While many jilted YouTubers left the platform, others developed whole channels devoted to critiquing the perverse impulses of their YouTube masters. Some makers created and posted explicit burnout-and-quitting YouTube videos to mark their exit. (Caldwell, 2023, p. 232).

I considered all of this unsolicited creator content—much of it part of the organized push-back campaign—part of the rift's data sample I was researching.

5.2. Crisis Intervention: Regaining Control of the Hacked, Leaked, or Disrupted Data Hive

The converging media industries (streaming, film, TV, and online content creation) often behave as shape-shifting phenomena when examined under the researcher's microscope:

> Just as they complicate viewer and maker experience, those media no longer exist within finite frames or discrete distribution windows that scholars can easily isolate to study. Even a short time of observation in the field quickly reveals that any one type of media production is rarely isolated from other forms of production. These multiple systems invariably overlap, shadow, feed, alter, monetize, or manage the specific production practice that the researcher initially sets out to study. I tangled with one telling example of layered *embedding*, which dramatized how industry folds and congeals different production cultures within a common industrial space. A weeklong trade show named Vidcon 2017 challenged my initial assumptions. (Caldwell, 2023, p. 34)

YouTube's smack-down of its young partner creators (Figure 4) also challenged me to find an effective means to convincingly describe and map the boundaries of production cultures in ethnographic fieldwork.

A production culture's borders are not self-evident, even though above-the-line executives, and management "insiders" make it appear so. Therefore, if academics intend to research:

> (a) New online social media creators, for example, then they'll *also* have to account for cohorts of adjacent cloaked personnel embedded with them (fig.4). These suitors would include (b) the old media talent agencies that capably harvest aspiring creators and (c) the legacy ad agency departments in the game that package the necessary sponsorship and merchandizing deals that online influencers depend on. Influencers, talent agents, and ad agencies all employ different trade conventions. They pose distinctively in their own trade sectors, and each of these largely different groups makes media differently from the other. Yet here—via temporary social media partnerships formed in inter-trade contact zones and trade shows—the sectors are knotted strategically together. Trying to describe or feature any one production group (like online creators or influencers) in scholarship should also entail describing the group's position within the embedded system as a whole. (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 34–35)
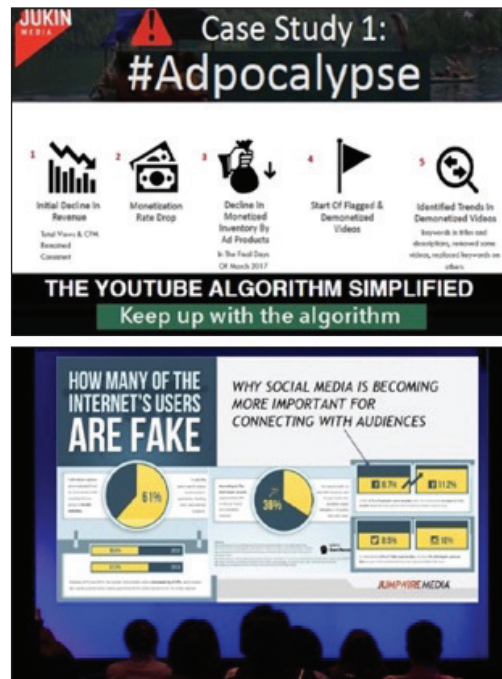
Figure 4. Making sense of the rift. Notes: What production approach makes any sense to aspirant creators when YouTube mentors tell them that "61%" of the internet users that creators upload during the Adpocalypse "are fake"?; jaded skepticism about the authenticity of anything online pervaded teen influencer pedagogy after the Adpocalypse; photos are public displays for workshop audiences by Jukin (top) and JumpWire Media (lower), at YouTube's Vidcon, Anaheim, CA (photo by John T. Caldwell, 2017).

This is especially true if one intends to employ a complex "systems" or "ecosystem" approach in research, wherein we need to describe and account for the worker's predicament across strata in the industry's power hierarchies; and across adjacent production cultures, on the set or in the editing suite.

5.3. Corporate Crisis Management to Mitigate Rifts in a Collective Trade Space

To counter the widespread blowback from angry YouTubers after YouTube had abruptly demonetized their once-profitable channels, YouTube/Google/Alphabet helped host a single hybrid in-person transmedia event at the Anaheim, CA Convention Center called Vidcon, with a week-long interaction of over 20,000 paying creator attendees in 2017. In doing so, Vidcon (see Figure 5) exposed for research a deep traceable cross section within YouTube's complex political-economic ecosystem. An in-person show and Q&A onstage at this trade convention by Link and Rhett of *Good Mythical Morning* (staged for the vast crowd of influencers present) proved strategic. The convention center stage, that is, was choreographed by YouTube in their attempt to "fix" the 2016 Adpocalypse fallout. Spotlighted onstage, the headlining show's showcase at the center of the larger rift of creators allowed me to isolate a clear research starting point. That is, the evidence I traced out from this "trade theater" nexus point allowed me to sample evidence in a way that was alternative to either "random sampling" or "cherry-picking" data. The Adpocalypse 2016 rift and the Vidcon 2017 response to it offer a fitting prototype for how translocalism, from anthropology (Appadurai, 1996; Greiner & Sakdapolrak, 2013; Hannerz, 2012), and chain-referral sampling—also known as "snowball sampling" in ethnography (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981)—together with "contact tracing" from epidemiology (Fetzer & Graeber, 2021; Heckathorn, 2002; Klovdahl, 1985) can be adapted as viable methods in

production studies research. More discussion about the basis for integrating both "translocalism" (from anthropology) and "trace sampling" (from epidemiology) as "rift-trace-sampling" in media industries research, that is, as a data sampling methodology, is found in *Specworld* (Caldwell, 2023, pp. 282–284).

The schematic in Figure 6 provides a researchable snapshot, an inter-institutional map that further details the odd and surprising network triggered when YouTube attempted to cover and contain its snowballing controversy. In addition, the platform exposed its complex roots for scholarly analysis in a single day (June 22, 2017). This diagram exemplifies "contact trace sampling" and disembedding analysis on one overhyped corporate attempt to "fold" and contain a rift between the YouTube platform and its vast numbers of precarious, cynical online creator "partners." Tracing out the links from this single nexus point exposes complex interconnections across firms and intermediaries.

The trans-firm map shown in Figure 6, an industrial snapshot-in-time, allows us to trace various ripple effects downstream in the embedded creator-platform. This ripple engagement is multi-directional, and, surprisingly, crosses at least:

> Four different—and *ostensibly competing*—corporate conglomerates: (1) the YouTube/Google/Alphabet system that hosts the creators (upper left); (2) the Amazon system and manufacturers that merchandize and monetizes the creator's spin-off products (uppercenter); (3) the CNBC/ NBC-Universal/Nasdaq financial trades system that covered and valued the event as a financial market in real-time (lower left); and (4) the Vice/HBO/Warner Media/AT&T conglomerate that makes its own opportunistic spin-off content. (Caldwell, 2023, p. 284)
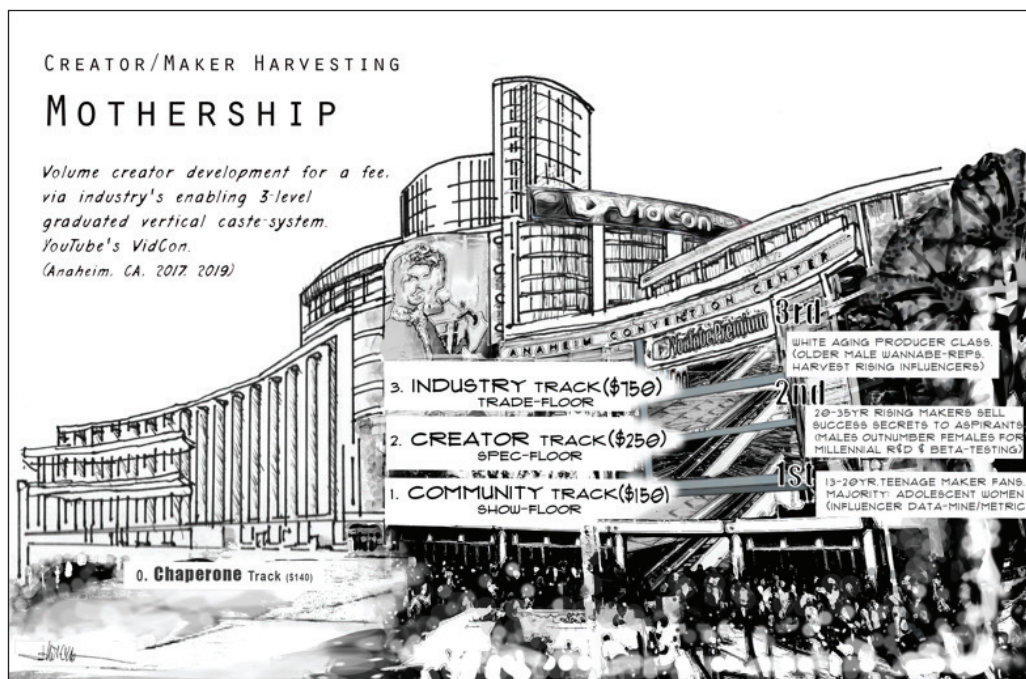

Figure 5. Three distinct online production cultures made up Vidcon 2017 (graphic drawing by John T. Caldwell, 2019). Notes: These cultures behaved like a creator-harvesting mothership; media industries are rarely monoliths since they regularly embed different production cultures together to create the illusion of "a" unified industry.

This ancillary media coverage included a news feature produced by ViceNews (Figure 6, upper right), that highlighted the posturing of the "independent hosts" appearing on YouTube's center stage at the convention.

In reaction to wide-ranging discontent among its individual online creator "partners," the CEO of YouTube appeared on a large screen above the main stage of the annual convention hall to soothe anxieties and suspicions among its immense young creator audience. The CEO's goal: to convince individual creators to have faith in the immense ecosystem, in that her platform's aims were neither predatory nor punitive. To act out its "transparency theater," YouTube booked one of its most popular creator channels (*Good Mythical Morning*) to stage a "live interview" (also streamed) with its CEO. This clearly aimed to establish the good intentions of the YouTube/Google/Alphabet ecosystem. It also showcased and outlined corporate plans for supposedly better (and more profitable) financial relationships with its hundreds of thousands of the conglomerate's individual, aspiring creator "partners." Yet *Good Mythical Morning* also mutually exploited the event to promote its own proprietary consumer products and activities within its normally very different Amazon media ecosystem. Because large media trade shows like Vidcon feign an ecumenical relationship across "the industry," other conglomerates stepped up to the event's content feeding-trough as well.
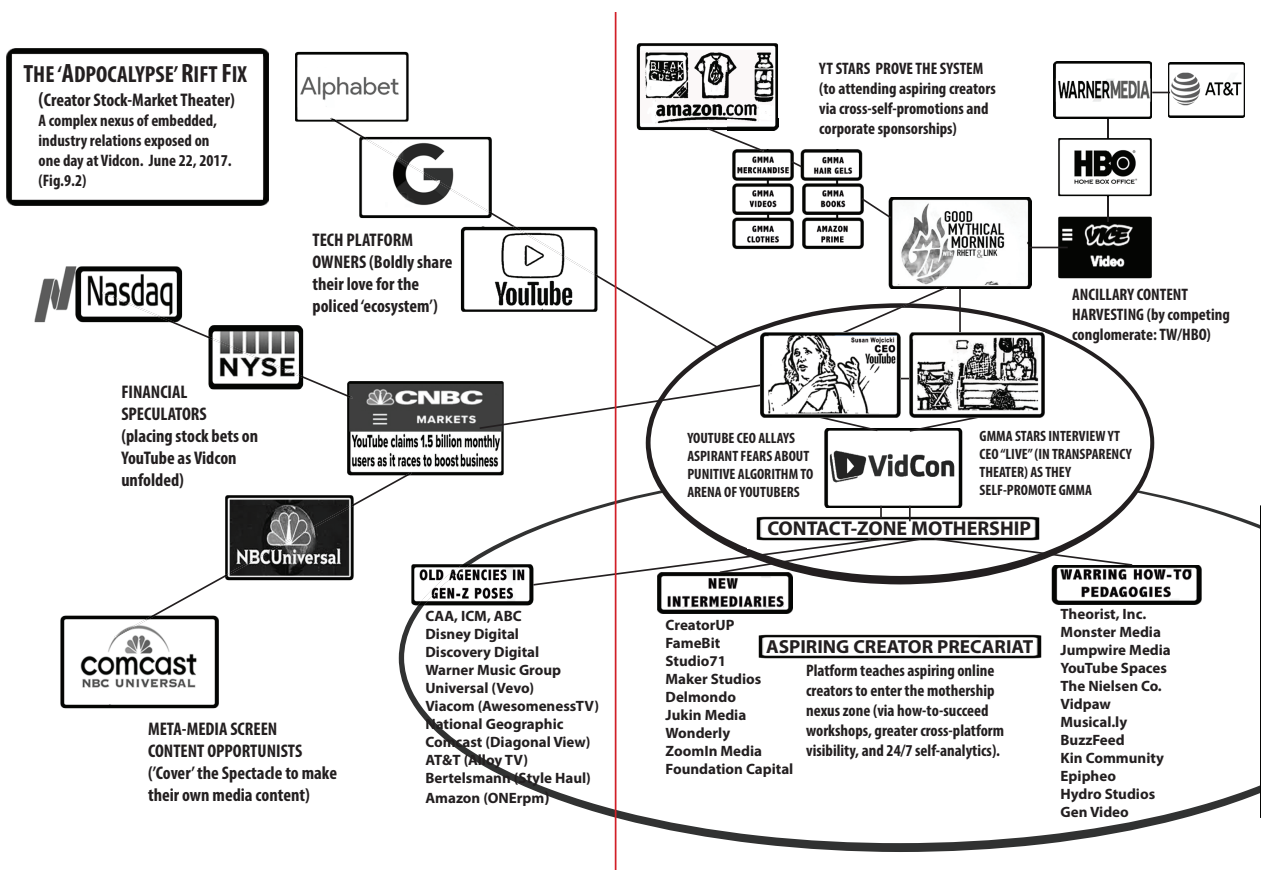

Figure 6. Rift trace sampling to research a vast interfirm nexus point. Notes: A method of creating evidence "data-sets" that are more disinterested to the researcher—even though the same evidence is highly significant to the complex industrial media system that unintentionally discloses or leaks it; rift-trace sampling takes an institutional "snapshot" of complex interfirm relations (triggered by stressed industrial rifts) for use as a research data-sample; to regain control of one of its large system's fractures, the YouTube mothership, with all of its corporate competition as de facto "co-participants"—attempts to mitigate, cover-over, and profit from the symbolic resolution of a rift with social media creators that it has first created. Source: Caldwell (2017; original drawing and photos from Vidcon17 Anaheim).

The NBC/Universal/Comcast conglomerate carried news stories about Vidcon and the future of YouTube on NBC. The Time-Warner/HBO/AT&T conglomerate had ancillary programs about Rhett and Link of *Good Mythical Morning* on their then-owned Vice channel. And all of this ancillary coverage unfolded as the Wall Street financial markets "placed bets" on the event's outcomes and YouTube prospects via business coverage in the financial trades and CNBC.

Yet these were just the standard suspects, the large competing corporate players hovering around the vast ostensibly unified trade ritual in Anaheim. Far more interesting to me were the hundreds of smaller companies attending the confab that were attempting to gain a foothold or increase leverage. These included many tech and content startups, along with the multichannel networks who fought against each other to sign up their own creator partners from among the trade-show attendees. But there were also scores of traditional companies, ad agencies, and masked talent agencies like Hollywood's Creative Artists Agency that appeared in stealth mode. They postured to the adolescent creator attendees not in their staid "old media" posturing, but instead donned Gen-Z personas that seemed to be far edgier and current than standard connotations of "old media."

Outside of the main event, Vidcon was equally active, churning week-long content creator hive, with hundreds of costly workshops mentoring thousands of aspirants on "how to make it" as an "online content creator." Scores of other "experts" panels taught hacks and tricks on how to program, monetize, and "scale-up" channels, how to co-brand and merchandize, including how to "hack the YouTube algorithm" for success. Many individual aspiring and rising creators also shared their thoughts on creator precarity with me as well. My goal in fieldwork was to better understand this industrial hive—through the human subjects and small firms involved—at a stressed moment of system-wide conflict. I tried, that is, to closely observe, describe, and map cross-sections of the stressed hive churn in more systematic ways. Only after I attempted to excavate, describe, and build some grounded theory (Somekh & Lewin, 2005) from this fieldwork, did I realized that what I'd actually done with *Specworld* was to write an ethnography not of online creators, but of mentoring, workshopping, and aspiration markets. This underscored that the subject for my research was a volatile media ecosystem that profits only to the extent that it can manage its complex scale and control creator unruliness.

Inside this transient, morphing web of corporations, frozen in time in Anaheim (Figure 6), YouTube/Google/Alphabet's self-dealing is far from surprising. Yet the de facto partnering between ostensible competitors set in motion at this vast convention undercuts the way media political economists normally clean up connections and harden corporate boundaries. This hardening process in research often dramatizes how each conglomerate expands (through ownership, mergers, finance) to gain more competitive market share, and thus increase control in industry sectors. In my fieldwork at Vidcon, by contrast, I tried to look beyond ownership and control. I tried instead to excavate and expose a researchable but more unorthodox and fluid network of non-conglomerate behavior that included competing content-scavenging corporations, jilted young YouTubers, talent- and content-harvesting competitors, wannabe Hollywood players, and exploitative bottom-feeder carpetbaggers from Hollywood.

6. Beyond Method: Why Stressors Research Matters Conceptually

My recent research fieldwork avoids the dismissive academic caste hierarchy in the commonplace professorial cliché—"those who can't do research, do methodology." I avoid the dismissal because many of the scores of

young humanities-based media studies scholars I have supervised have been challenged professionally to navigate an alien research funding gantlet created by rigid *imported* notions of "methods." Their innovative, often boundary-crossing, approaches to critical research (a round peg) were sometimes de-prioritized when forced by funders to fit probability-based definitions of media data sets and evidence samples (a square hole). One culprit? The common notion that non-probability sampling necessarily entails researcher "subjectivity" is false. That claim is a reductive caricature leveraged by quantitative scholars. The rift-trace sampling of evidence proposed here, and detailed in *Specworld*, is based instead on the system's de facto sampling—not the researcher's subjective choices. So, without appropriate institutional sanction, any critical media scholarship that hopes or promises to generalize or theorize about industry norms or qualitative "peaks" must *still* find and establish a viable way to prove why the evidence they've sampled is significant, justified, and sufficient.

The task is important for practical reasons but also for theoretical and intellectual reasons. This is because it is also imperative that we re-conceptualize the scale of the media practices we try to isolate and generalize from in media industry studies. Because the 21st-century media industries we research are immense, embedded, multi-scalar, complex systems—comprised of corporations, technologies, screen content, creative labor, and individual human subjects—we must pay more attention to justifying relationships between the evidence, scale, and scope of our research subject. Far from a technical question just about method, the task of describing the linkages between all of those interconnected differences in scale stands as a pressing intellectual matter for us as well.

To take on this problem in production study, I have adapted anthropology's chain-referral (Bernard, 2018, pp. 145–163; Coleman, 1958) interviewing method as a way to build-out the evidence sample in research. My longstanding aim has been to go beyond human subjects referrals and informant interviews. I have adopted this approach:

> To trace nonhuman interactions and organizational relationships, in addition to human connections....I use industrial fault lines and fractures as starting points in the sample, [in what] I term the method of rift-trace sampling rather than chain referral. Every crew habit and piece of gear comes with its own footnotes, de facto referrals, and interfirm relations. Even if they are not disclosed in written or verbal form, all technology and labor behaviors come packaged with their own specific technical genealogies, origins, instigators, and outcomes. As such, tech and operators form parts of significant networks (nonhuman and human) that can and should be productively tracked down and mapped by the scholar. Rift-trace sampling thus echoes Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), which distributes agency across human and nonhuman subjects in mixed systems. Good research can show how the object or practice in question connects directly to a specific, nonrandomized but delimited network of other practices, institutions, and contexts. (Caldwell, 2023, p. 285)

In general, my doctoral media researchers want to understand not probability, but something more interesting and thicker: industry's expressive behaviors, and how cultures of production are made and maintained. To get at these more complex non-quantitative goals, I encourage my doctoral candidates to account for and consider both of the institutional narratives of peak quality described earlier in the essay (academic vs. industrial) in their research. How, for example, does the industry's trade rhetoric of exceptional quality compare and contrast to academia's parallel legitimation (and often celebration) of television and media quality? How do those dueling or adjacent trade narratives reflect economic and sociological

behaviors in these communities? Both academics and media management play this game of attribution, as Newman and Levine (2012) detail. However, regardless of which quality meta-narrative my media studies PhD candidates emphasize (industrial or scholarly), one institutional influence from quantitative research, can overshadow them. Ill-fitting social sciences metrics can bedevil many of the younger North American media scholars and humanities PhD candidates that I have supervised who try to generalize, convincingly, about contemporary media industry trends (especially those with origins in textual analysis). Why? Even in the humanities, benchmarks for dissertation approvals and then for subsequent research funding invariably pivot around whether the candidate or applicant has employed a convincing enough evidence sample or justifiable research data set.

This research bias—appraisal favor given to the disinterested sampling of industrial evidence—however, flies in the face of long-sanctioned qualitative research habits in Anglo-American humanities-based media and film studies. Unlike Western European universities (which legitimize and fund disciplines more equitably) social scientists in the US (on research funding boards that I have served on) often dismiss media studies scholars in the humanities for their predilection to "cherry-pick data" or for the unfortunate way they treat evidence as unsystematic "apples-and-oranges" samples, chosen deductively, or for convenience in analysis. Research funding boards in turn expect or require more systematic, disinterested handling of evidence from emerging media scholars, than the traditional arts and humanities in Anglo-American universities have long normalized. Government research funding and corporate funding in particular—what Lazarsfeld termed "administrative research" (Babe, 2000)—both favor and fund scientistic "actionable outcomes," even for media studies. Yet, traditional media aesthetics in Anglo-American humanities disciplines never intended or produced such "deliverables" (since public policy or corporate practice were never seen as a valid end-point of critical arts and humanities scholarship).

Applied systematically, the method of rift-trace sampling I have briefly introduced in this essay, and developed more fully in *Specworld*, can mitigate potentially negative appraisals that the researcher has cherry-picked evidence to theorize some general point (likely known in advance). That is, the descriptive, empirical rigor of rift-trace analysis proposed here can preempt caricaturing of the research project as mostly "interpretation," as an act of hermeneutics. Both terms function as disciplinary straw-men. Such approaches are often dismissed as outdated humanities modes practiced by canonizing historians and/or innovation- or exception-focused critics. In short, faced with a mixed-scalar industry that is habitually opaque and dissembling by design and convention, "rift-trace (like snowball) sampling selects only subjects via self-defined relationships that the local system itself [not an 'interpretive' scholar or critic] 'deems significant'" (Caldwell, 2023, p. 285). In this way, in embedded, mixed-scale media industries, we look closely at how the complex system (often unintentionally) samples itself.

7. New Televisual Peak Media Stressors/Threats

For industry and scholars alike, the successive media peaks discussed here—1980s multichannel televisuality ("Quality TV"), 2010s peak streaming media, and YouTube's utopian era for online creators (2010–2017)—may all now have receded into the past. Yet the promise of peak waves keeps coming. Two other recent technical inventions, that is, are triggering yet another potential rise-and-fall moment in media industry quality/volatility. These new technologies signal the likelihood of another era of stress-inducing formal exceptionalism. This promise (or threat?) of newer quality content and hyper-stylizing televisual content

onscreen now comes in the form of OSVP (on-set virtual production) and AI. Both can be appreciated and reckoned with as potential stylizing-machines-on-steroids. We need to keep in mind that technology innovation breakthroughs and pending content peaks like these (Table 1.) regularly (and historically) have also collapsed job distinctions, caused layoffs, and spiked creator labor precarity on-the-ground in media production. Periods defined by critical acclaim about content alongside destabilized production labor are anything but exceptions (Figure 7). These strange bedfellows seem to partner in pushing industry's recurring rise-and-fall cycle.

Figure 7. An OSVP and AI-Golden Age? (new technology style-on-steroids disrupts creative production labor; photo by John T. Caldwell, 2014).

The new hi-tech threats are not entirely novel. In the pre-AI 2010s professional (but non-union) Visual Effects Society artists and technicians publicly protested "runaway" production subsidies (FX work shipped "overseas") that unsettled their employment. This blowback by artists became a transnational industry rift during online streaming's peak media era (Figure 6). By 2024, VES artists (*still* without unions or studio contracts) now face encroachment by and unemployment from other adjacent professional workers who have now used AI to expand their own overlapping skill sets. This AI-retooling outside of VES is meant to attract producers looking for ever-lower budgets. Producers, writers, editors, and directors can now spin out lots of non-textual imagery, including digital FX and sounds using AI. They defend themselves against claims of encroachment in the trades, usually by justifying their AI-use as "only pre-production." This misdirection by the encroachers, at least in the US, means that non-union production illustrators, set-decorators, carpenters, gaffers, and early career crafts-persons all face much bleaker job prospects precisely because OSVP and AI have cut-down crew sizes and location shooting.

Media trade sites in 2024, like *the Wrap*'s "Holding On In Hollywood" (Knolle, 2024) dramatize the now-widespread push-back and suspicion of AI by alarmed professional production workers. Not unlike the worker complaints in Section 1 about chronic unemployment caused by the "collapse" of prestige streaming in 2022, I conclude the essay with worker comments about the current grim prospects for future employment in the wake of OSVP and AI. Both OSVP and AI severely cut into and reduce a studio's or

Table 1. Peaks, innovations, and fallout.

Televisual peaks (each spurs content production)	Innovations [threats]	Collateral damages
1. US Multichannel Cable Era ("Televisuality") (1980–1992)	1. Government regulation/ restraint ends 2. New tech (digital FX [effects], nonlinear editing, Rank-Cintel, Stedicam, HDTV) 3. New labor (MTV, ads, film schools)	1. National network oligopoly ends 2. Broadcast three-camera studio mode marginalized 3. Rise and threat of non-union labor 4. Gig economy becomes dominant
2. Peak Online Streaming Era (2008–2020)	1. Netflix, Prime, new big budget norms 2. Transnational production, outsourcing 3. Trans-regional co-financing spike 4. New norm: online home viewing	1. Paramount, NBC can't keep up 2. Layoffs, strikes, de-unionization 3. Deep cuts in Hollywood studio budgets 4. Theater chains falter, recession
3. Utopian YouTube Expansion (vs. Adpocalypse) (2010–2017)	1. All production now self-financed 2. Integrated advertising/sponsorship 3. "Spec-work" becomes norm 4. Multitasking and manic uploading	1. Creators shoulder all platform risk 2. Creators corralled as merchandizers 3. Decline of unionized wage labor 4. Collapsing craft segregation/taylorism
4. The Televisual AI and OSVP Era (2022–2025)	1. Pre-visualization on steroids (AI) 2. Widescreen sets & "locations" (OSVP) 3. Generic music production on steroids 4. Computerized lighting design (OSVP)	1. Layoffs of storyboard artists and assistants 2. Location scouts and set builders obsolete 3. Composers and audio technicians decline 4. Gaffers, electricians, and carpenters decline

producer's need for the considerable work of traditional production design, lighting, and physical production. Benji Bakshi, cinematographer on CBS Studios' *Star Trek: Strange New Worlds* wishfully ignores the darker labor implications when explains:

> [AI] allows me to experiment in a way where I don't have to be consuming resources or time—which is always precious on set....I've heard a fear that AI techniques can flat out replace people....The way I'm using AI to enhance my creative approach is a way that honors the craft. (Carras, 2024, p. A6)

This Hollywood cinematographer justifies and rationalizes his ancillary use of AI on-the-side (even while admitting the likelihood that AI might lead to unemployment in other production crafts) by invoking and leveraging a trusty kind of symbolic or cultural capital available to production department heads. That is, *his* AI somehow ostensibly "honors the craft."

Other visual production workers see AI's unemployment logic even more directly and starkly. In touting the magic of AI, Edward L. Garcia, costume designer on the FX Network series *American Crime Story* flags a nagging worry:

> We rely on illustrators as an integral part of our creative process in helping us develop and bring to life the images that we paint together in our heads....With the ability to type in any celebrity's name...and get an image of them dressed in minutes—that's like somebody's entire job. (Carras, 2024, p. A6)

Garcia, a successful costume designer, praises AI's visual brainstorming, while expressing anxiety about how his use of it may put pro illustrators out of work. Garcia marvels at what he's learned using AI during Hollywood's 2024 production downturn and unemployment crisis, but expresses anxiety about how he is now doing the job of another (potentially obsolete) craft category.

Not unique to art direction or production design, this conflicted anxiety about possible unemployment complicity extends into editing and post-production as well. In 2024 Julie Antepli, film editor on Netflix's *The Circle*, puzzled over the possibilities, including:

> The possibility of AI composing musical cues or creating scenes that would be impossible to film in real life....But the thought of that technology replacing the work of a composer or visual effects artist makes her feel "terrible." Immediately we see how some jobs would be affected. The problem is the cat is already out of the bag, and it's not gonna go back in. (Carras, 2024, p. A6)

Antepli, a Hollywood professional, helps rationalize the use of AI in post-production while admitting some guilt and feeling "terrible" about its impact on jobs. Her conceptual work-around that helps accommodate AI-induced professional unemployment? The new technology is *inevitable*, it is already here ("already out of the bag")—so production workers might as well figure out how they can take advantage of it.

Prematurely calling new cutting-edge technologies "inevitable," cuts out a considerable range of directions both production workers and media researchers might pursue, or questions they might ask about alternative arrangements. Scholars owe it to ourselves, to keep these options and questions, on the table. This independence is crucial, since many researcher questions (like creative labor precarity) are unwelcomed by corporate media and financialized technology firms. We can ignore or push back against the industry's preemption logic of inevitability, which attempts to script proprietary advantage into trade narratives about quality media. Such an industrial disposition is likely an end-product of evolutionary determinism and technical inevitability favored in the media trades. Taking on these industrial habits, and researching them systematically, might allow scholars to more fully understand, and unpack, the approaching cycles of televisual quality, media peaks, and industry golden ages.

8. Conclusion

From ethnographic fieldwork, *Specworld* (Caldwell, 2023) argues that fractures and rifts in creative production give scholars unintended (unplanned and uncensored) self-portraits of what complex industries "betray" as most important to the system as a whole. In proposing "rift-trace data-sampling" for evidence I argue that industrial failures (rather than televisual masterworks or peak media) act as unintended, even subconscious

disclosures of key industrial practices. Triggered or outed disclosures and stressors of this sort may offer a more convincing way to understand the complex behaviors—and system-wide functions—even of golden-age eras and peak media innovations.

Stress research, via rift-trace sampling, allows scholars to locate and more systematically unpack the inter-trade conflicts and disruptions that often spur innovations. That is, the method allows scholars to find parallels and make cross-craft connections. Labor stresses in adjacent sectors are normally covered-over or marketed-over by media industries since the industry profits by keeping its trusty traditional craft balkanization neatly concealed under an illusion of media trade consensus. Stress research functions therefore as informational anti-marketing. Stress research allows scholars to "change the narrative" or paradigm normally controlled and made monolithic by marketers, branding consultants, and publicists (talking points that in turn habitually script the trade press). Effective stress research ideally allows scholars to take back the meta-narrative from industry. That is, it makes it possible for the researcher to re-take the "bird's-eye-view" of industry away from the trade media. This is important precisely because the method forces us to identify key connections and interactions between the normally segregated crafts in the below-the-line creative labor world.

Some might question the wisdom of my employing complex systems analysis or a media ecosystems approach for research focused mostly on finding and mapping crises, rather than studying sunnier or lengthier continuities. Another potential issue is whether my approach risks the opposite extreme: narrating media industries in a permanent state of crisis and constant decline. I would push back against this criticism by reference to the preceding discussion. That is, I want to reiterate that there is a necessary push–pull between disruptive stressed innovation (forces that create peaks) and the subsequent reductive imperative to formulate the "rules" behind the peak so that studios can find budgetary efficiencies by making "quality" production "formulaic." The historical understanding of the necessary linkage between stressed innovation and reductive formulaic efficiencies in organizations is found in foundational film historiography, including the *Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell et al., 1985).

The build-ups and declines of the three hyper-stylizing quality media periods discussed in this essay—(a) innovative "televisual" US multichannel programming in the 1980s cable era, (b) innovative online "Peak TV" in the 2010s Netflix streaming era, and (c) innovative online "maker" era of the utopian YouTube era (before its dystopian Adpocalypse crisis)—all behaved like industrial "sugar-highs." Market stressors and over-financing pushed media aesthetics to impressive levels in each period. Thus justifying the televisual designation. Yet, the same rich stressors proved unsustainable for many competitors in the years of "withdrawal" following each high. We need to take the declines and losers of each golden age as seriously as we do the winners. Winners, after all, at least statistically, are not, by definition, symptomatic of anything.

Collateral damage within the creative labor workforce (which is often off-the-radar for scholars) does as much to explain each golden era discussed here as do invocations of top-down corporate design or intentionality. Certainly, collateral damages offer more than the monolithic board-room pretensions of market control which are scripted into executive talking points and a production's financial prospectuses. Along with a studio's PR crisis interventions and brand-management vigilance, all of these workaday corporate practices function as forms of self-serving speculation. In some ways, most of the corporate media's preemptive mythologizing about quality peaks occludes the actual creative work of a vast number of key human subjects on the ground.

These "top-down" proprietary trade narratives, from the executive suites, challenge scholars to examine such practices, and their downsides, more closely. Taking this approach may help us better understand and explain future industrial high-points of televisual, peak media, or golden ages in media (AI and OSVP), along with their shadow downsides (outsourcing, unemployment, and obsolescence).

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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