

Book Review:
*Television at Work: Industrial
Media and American Labor*

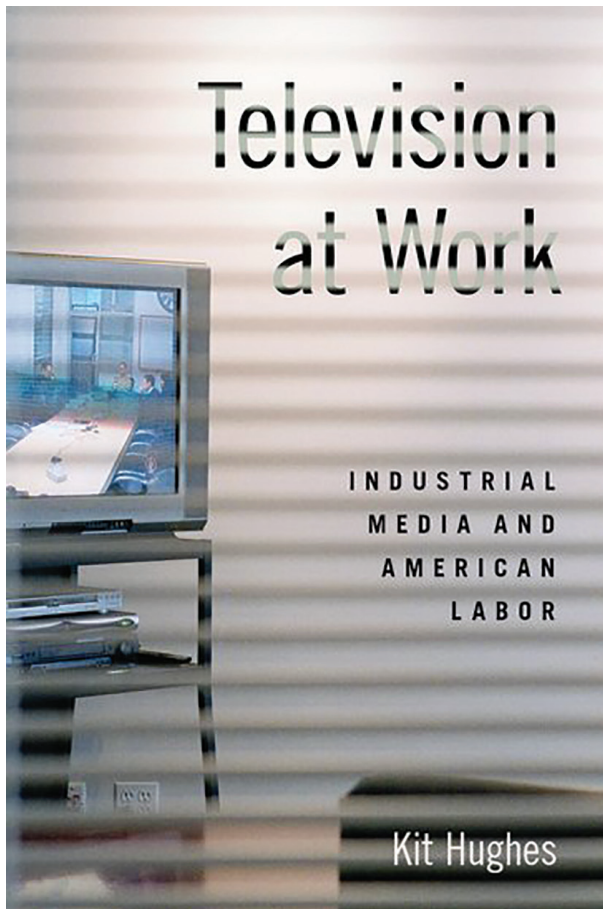
Hughes, Kit

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In her impressively researched history of television employed as a tool within the US business world, Kit Hughes argues that revisiting the past to consider television beyond its dominant form as commercial entertainment produces new insights into how the medium came to be and what it came to mean. While her objects of analysis are unusual—training videos, corporate newsletters, and a wide range of corporate public relations programming—Hughes embeds her research securely within the literature and preoccupations of television studies. Each chapter orients around a core television concept, including flow, immediacy, time-shifting, and narrowcasting, and then works to extend or revise that central concept based on the new research she provides. Hughes' research is a fascinating addition to our historical and contemporary debates about medium specificity and the evolution of television, and part of the book's pleasures stem from the fact that this book is doing something rather different. Hughes acknowledges her deep indebtedness to the

work of Lisa Parks, and that comparison seems an apt descriptor for *Television at Work: Industrial Media and American Labor*.

Hughes faced challenges in terms of objects and evidence—a common problem in constructing media histories and something that lurks in the background of every chapter. Compounding the fact that historical television was ephemeral in even the best funded and most widely distributed contexts, the corporate texts that become her objects of intended analysis were produced for incredibly specific, temporally bound, management-inspired, and technologically driven contexts. In short, what middle manager at an industrial firm or furniture manufacturer would have thought to save for posterity all their early training videos? While Hughes notes that she spent some time watching “the most aggressively boring video programming” to complete this work, only her final chapter features the sort of detailed textual analysis possible with more contemporary studies of television.

Hughes finds her evidence in the archives. In terms of sources, she relies heavily on publications like *Business Screen* and *BusinessTV*, along with a host of trade periodicals for specific industries (like banking and agriculture). In addition, she gleans what she can from less TV-oriented materials like equipment handbooks, production manuals, and advertisements. To establish a firmer sense of human motivations behind all the textual traces, Hughes completed interviews with equipment manufacturers, audiovisual professionals, and corporate leaders. She does not prominently set apart these interviews within the chapters; instead, she subtly incorporates pieces from the interviews, weaving them in for historical context within the chapters. The book is organized chronologically, but her approach to history downplays a strict periodization and instead presents history as an evolution of broader corporate, managerial, and governmental priorities and investments.

Each chapter features a distinctive type of television technology and reworks foundational television studies concepts to position a historical era of business television (BTV). The first chapter is the most expansive, carefully establishing technological context by reviewing the histories of early media (including the telegraph, telephone, phonograph, radio, and film), though the larger goal of this section is to establish a frame for how businesses incorporated and employed technologies to extend their reach, enhance their connection with employees, and pursue ever-greater efficiencies. Chapter 2, the only one focused exclusively on industrial (rather than office) settings, works with the concept of flow, pulling more from William Uricchio than Raymond Williams. Interpreting a series of advertisements for innovative industrial or closed-circuit television systems, Hughes argues that television operated as a prosthesis for workers, enhancing sight and allowing workers to operate from secure locations while observing harsh or dangerous industrial environments.

Chapter 3's case study of AT&T and its development of a production studio to exploit technologies like long line distribution, theater TV, and early forms of tape demonstrate how television enhanced the reach of shareholder meetings and product demonstrations, and also invited new forms of training, employee self-assessment, and education (defined broadly). While many of these technological systems remained cumbersome and depended on the ingenuity of a new class of A/V worker, the goal of greater immediacy seemed possible during this era. Chapter 4, then, digs deeper into taped media, exploring the era before the famous VHS-Betamax debate. Hughes establishes time-shifting as a feature of BTV that

extended not only the location of the office but also the hours during which an employee might work. The final chapter features a bit of a time jump, taking us into such contemporary challenges as the broad decline of unions, neoliberalism's brutal profit-focus, and the deterritorialization of globalization. During this period, satellites helped companies articulate a unified corporate message across increasingly broad international sites by narrowcasting video news programs as a regular form of communication and outreach. Chapter 5's key strength is Hughes' analyses of actual programming from the era, which gives this chapter a more focused set of texts and also invites a discussion of the aesthetics of these brief eras of television.

While this work is firmly positioned as a television history, it also operates as a history of labor and management relations. To provide this important theoretical frame for the objects in question, Hughes cites work from a variety of related fields, including sociology, organizational communication, and new media studies. The scope of works featured in the chapter notes is impressive, although the absence of a final bibliography might inconvenience scholars eager to dig deeper into the various sources Hughes cites. She connects these fields through her discussion of labor, talking her readers through media studies texts that identify viewing as a form of work, the public-private distinctions that orient so much of classic feminist studies literature, and the Marxist theories that many fields employ to explore exploitation as a central tenet of capitalism. Hughes incorporates these wider disciplinary frames to position BTV within the dominant discourses that informed its constantly evolving set of uses and meanings. A subtle critique hums in the background, consistently questioning the ways business prioritizes profit and efficiency over compassion for its labor force, but Hughes mostly confines her views to brief asides that keep us focused on the more urgent demand to acknowledge BTV as a missing segment of television history.

One of the major through lines of the book is how television enabled companies to extend their workers' labor beyond the physical spaces of their employment, whether that means providing visibility to remote factory sites, networking one training effort across diverse geographic spaces, or reaching into domestic spaces with the labor of viewing employer-produced content. Humor emerges any time Hughes points out that managers flattered themselves by believing this sort of television content could make work more "fun." It is these moments that made me wish more BTV programs still existed for Hughes to analyze. Just how boring *was* a lot of this content, and what can we learn about emerging production styles and evolving storytelling practices from industrial media? In particular, Hughes' research left me curious about training videos as a genre—how have they evolved over time, and in what ways did television shape training methods, perhaps in ways that continue to reverberate today? Whether these absences are due to space or access, Hughes nevertheless convinces the reader that these objects are worthy of deeper inquiry.

If there are parts of the book that lack development, it is almost certainly due to the ambition and novelty of the project. As Hughes explains, commercial and non-profit television has preoccupied scholars, and when scholars have looked at industrial media, these studies generally have focused on industrial *film*. Because Hughes is establishing a new critical landscape, she must establish the context, both in terms of television studies and in terms of broader historical evolutions of thought regarding business, labor, and technology. The scope of Hughes' history is expansive, beginning with Fordism and extending through

post-Fordism and the fragmentation of global neoliberalism. As a result, Hughes' brief introductions of historical context can feel too condensed, with the reader wanting her to pause and drill down more to show her research and to position her own ideological influences.

Another area to pause, perhaps, is in explaining her research methodology. The book's conclusion consists largely of acknowledgements, but Hughes also describes the challenges of archival research, particularly when those archives are held as proprietary by corporate entities. Sharing the ways these limits shaped the work within the chapters might help readers comprehend the contributions of her own intellectual labor to connect the dots and interpret her evidence. So, too, might she extend a brief discussion of the limits of industrial trades as resources. In chapter 2, Hughes admits they tend to be cheerleaders for the industries they cover, and that this optimism can shape their representation of nascent and emerging media technologies. Because trades are such a vital source of research for many media industry scholars, a deeper discussion of sources, in general, would add even more insight to our constant work of balancing access limitations with the need to critically engage corporations' roles in shaping media, then and now.

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