



Book Review: Screen Distribution and the New King Kongs of the Online World

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Abstract

A short review of the 2013 book, [Screen Distribution and the New King Kongs of the Online World](#), a succinct publication which explores the impact of new methods of media distribution, from their inception in the 1990's, to the current climate of both legitimate and illegitimate streaming sources, and offers a framework within which to research future developments in the industry of online distribution. The review concludes with a brief critique and recommendations for those who may intend to use the book for research purposes.

Keywords: *Online, Distribution, Streaming, New Media, YouTube*



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Book Review: Screen Distribution and the New King Kongs of the Online World By Stuart Cunningham and John Silver. Palgrave Pivot, 2013

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Stuart Cunningham and John Silver combine their efforts in the recent *Screen Distribution and the New King Kongs of the Online World* with the intention, not of answering, but of providing a framework around which to answer the question of where online distribution models will take the media industry. Their goal, as is stated often throughout the text, is to avoid taking a stance on the subject that is either optimistic (focusing on the ability of the online format to provide a democratization of media) or pessimistic (taking the stance that the new model will reinforce the control of current media powers ultimately harming consumers), but rather focusing on a “middle path”- a sort of hesitance to take a side that, in truth, is much more effective in the long run- while the book was published only a few months ago, the landscape of the digital market is in such flux that the figures and research employed by the authors, while thorough, may soon become outdated, if it has not already. The insistence on not predicting any solid results from said data ensures that, while this book is best consumed as soon as possible, it will maintain relevance well beyond its original publication date.

The authors argue that, while content is indeed the driving force of the media industry, it is useless without an effective distribution method capable of reaching the consumer. In an age where consumer attention is of the utmost value, traditional screen media outlets, such as theatres and terrestrial television services, have gained a new competitor in the form of online delivery systems that can be harnessed to provide to customers a higher level of both value and convenience, all while catering to their specific interests in ways that are unheard of in older forms of distribution.

This new competition, according to the authors, has in the last two decades been pushed through several stages of industrial maturity, and is now poised to enter the realm of the fully developed, complex marketplace formerly occupied only by major studios and media conglomerates. The parallels between previous historical upheavals of the established distribution order- the first being the so-called “Theater Wars” between 1917 and 1927, and the second being the introduction of Television in the early 1950’s- are discussed at length, providing a framework of evidence that, viewed through hindsight, seems to indicate that, while change is inevitable with the introduction of a new distribution method, there is little in the way of predictable outcomes; the volatility of the emerging digital marketplace, while sure to eventually become a large (if not dominant) , sustainable share of the distribution market, ensures that it will continue to evolve until a sort of equilibrium is reached between the emerging online distribution powerhouses and the traditional media corporations of the past.

It is difficult to wrap one’s mind around the almost blinding pace at which online content distribution emerged from the ether that is the world wide web, but the book opens by breaking down the history of the medium quite nicely, separating the stages of its development into digestible eras, first of pioneering, small-scale startups, which, after many of them failed to maintain profitability in the nascent market, experienced a “shakeout”, forced out by major companies with better funding capabilities and strategies. What could be a dry and confusing section is in fact a well-researched and well-presented chapter, allowing readers to see a clear, yet hectic, timeline of the first two decades of distribution.

Notably, the authors choose to focus on two major regions over the course of the text- America, and what they dub the “Rest of the World” markets, including major emerging

players in China, India, and Europe in their discussion, effectively broadening the often US-centric attitude of much research in this field to a more global scope.

While the online distribution market is always in flux, as new powers enter and exit the game as they test what the market will allow for, the authors focus on a few mainstays of the last few years, giving a thorough examination of industry leaders like YouTube, Hulu, Netflix, and Amazon, and pointing out the strategies that have made them successful in the current climate. Special interest is paid to the Google-owned site YouTube, as their global reach and user-generated content makes it a standout among the competition, the rest of whom struggle to maintain output on the level of even a fraction of YouTube's. Interestingly, there are a few sections dedicated to floundering sites, with advice worked into the analysis of their practices; a prime example in this case is the section on Yahoo!, whose market share has been steadily dwindling. The authors offer that the site could potentially use complex data aggregation methods to fund specialized content based on their users' tastes, in a way that other companies running non-original content cannot do.

The book's conclusion is dedicated to asking whether or not the industry changes we are currently experiencing matter at all; despite the thousands of hours of content being created daily by independent and semi-professional users of the new platforms, media conglomerates and studios still maintain a healthy market share, and may still make moves to control the emerging digital market that will prove more fruitful than their earlier endeavors. Again, the authors propose that they have no right to take a stance on the subject, but rather have made it their mission to pose the question for the sake of posterity; no amount of self-awareness, it would seem, can inform a solid decision on the future in such an uncertain transitional period

in media history. It is simply enough, then, they argue, to say that change is happening, and that it will bring lasting impact to the market as we know it.

The book is succinct, clearly written, and insightful, offering to the reader a plethora of well-referenced information and statistics. It is clear that the authors know the market quite well, and have harnessed the proper resources to back their claims as to the effectiveness of online distribution methods. One critique I would offer, however, is that the book avoids much talk of consumer tastes evolving with the offerings of the online market; the failure of certain models is often chalked up to a lack of content, legal holdups, or insufficient technology, but little attention is paid to the ever-increasing savvy of the consumer base, many of whom crave accessibility and affordability, and will turn to illicit means when the legal options are insufficient in these regards. Piracy is addressed in the text, but could have used its own chapter's worth of discussion, the results of which could have been added to the suggestions presented to the major licit distribution players. Overall, though, the authors meet the goal of their thesis; they present the information, and allow their readers to form personal conclusions. It would make an excellent choice for those seeking a thorough, recent source on online distribution models, as its short length hides a wealth of research and analysis through which new ideas can be galvanized.