

**BETWEEN GLOBAL AND LOCAL:
CONTEMPORARY MEDIA AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION**

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Tony Bennett and David Carter (editors)

Culture in Australia. Policies, Publics and Programs

Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001

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Eric Louw

The Media and Cultural Production

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[157] A critical question confronting those researching media and cultural production, policies and practices in contemporary societies is how to analyse the shifting relationships between global, national and local actors and institutions. Taken together, these two very different books suggest that while global actors and institutions are central to the current configuration of the media and culture industries, it remains vital to analyse media and cultural products and practices in national and local contexts. Both books also raise vital questions about the place of theory in contemporary media and cultural research.

Central to Eric Louw's book *The Media and Cultural Production* is the argument that we now live in a global network and information society, in which the fundamental political, economic and social struggles occur over the power to influence meaning making. Louw's key analytic tool to engage in this study of the production and circulation of meaning making is Gramsci's concept of hegemony, which Louw takes to mean 'the creation and maintenance of the consent of dominated groups for their domination' (22). Louw uses the theoretical concept of hegemony, and extensive secondary empirical materials, [158] to argue that we are currently witnessing the emergence of a new hegemonic elite constituted of global network capitalists. This

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elite is concentrated around Anglo (including American) media ownership, and has become the key framer of meaning making in network capitalism, in particular through the global activities of its managers and professional communicators.

These arguments are explored in two major sections of the book. First, Louw examines the structural and institutional conditions for the emergence of this new hegemonic elite, by analysing sites for contemporary meaning making. Specifically, he explores the reorganisation of the media and culture industries, transformations in the regulatory framework of media, and the ongoing commercialisation of the public sphere. Second, Louw analyses the processes by which meanings emerge from these sites of meaning making to circulate more broadly. Here, Louw's focus turns to questions such as which issues make news, and media coverage of war and of 'distant places'. Throughout, the author makes a strong case for the significance of discourse in challenging and then maintaining hegemony, and for the ways in which contemporary experiences of political and social events are managed by networked media organisations.

Louw's book makes three crucial contributions to contemporary analyses of media and cultural production, which also open up important avenues for further research. First, his use of hegemony allows him to examine how culturally based struggles over discourse occur simultaneously with political and economic struggles around issues such as modes of media regulation. In developing this analysis, Louw focuses on struggles among elites. Future research could also engage more fully with organisations including media and communication unions, such as the Communication Workers of America, who have been reinventing themselves as organisations relevant to network capitalism. Second, Louw makes a convincing case for the central significance of media organisations in the network society, in particular in terms of their control of the production and dissemination of information and knowledge through their access to technologies and through the global flows of their managers and communicators. Nevertheless, Louw's focus on Anglo corporations tends to limit his analysis of other significant cases including, for example, the tensions that have arisen for Silvio Berlusconi in combining his role as a politician and media owner in Italy. Third, Louw shows the need to analyse the interaction of global actors with national institutions such as the regulatory functions of state policy

makers. While Louw's analysis is suggestive of the diminishing capacity of state based policy makers, he also shows how influential policy makers have been significant in shifting the regulatory framework around media and communications in an attempt to make the state relevant to network capitalism.

It is these points of contestation and struggle around the role of the state and of national policy making in the realms of culture and media that are central to many of the contributors to *Culture in Australia*, edited by Tony Bennett and David Carter. This book, which emerged out of a workshop organised by the editors at the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy as part of the Reshaping Australian Institutions program of the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU, focuses on a diverse range of cultural and media institutions including cinema, sport, popular music, public broadcasting and Indigenous media. What holds the diverse chapter topics together is their engagement with the key goal of the book which, as stated in the excellent introduction, is to 'highlight the changing circumstances of Australian culture and of the cultural industries in Australia' (7), with a particular emphasis on the intersection of global, national and local cultural production, circulation and evaluation. In attempting to fulfil this goal, the book is divided into three major parts: 'Policy and Industry Contexts', 'Australian Culture and its Publics', and 'Programs of Cultural Diversity'. Each chapter can then be read as a case study of specific areas of culture in Australia. The common theme that emerges is that processes of globalisation offer both opportunities and threats in the Australian context, and that ultimately culture is a multi-dimensional practice impacted on by the global, national and local intersection of textual, institutional, technological, economic and policy processes. Throughout the book, the role of media organisations and products, both in being shaped by, and in shaping, culture in Australia is never far from the surface, thereby reinforcing Louw's argument around the centrality of the media practice and [159] product to contemporary society. In this way, many of the contributors also show the importance of analysing the links between formal political institutions and the formal and informal institutional relations that constitute everyday life if we are to understand contemporary cultural and media practice.

Through its engagement with the transformation of the culture industries, *Culture in Australia* provides three important insights into contemporary media and cultural

products and practices. *First*, many of the contributors reveal the tensions raised around cultural production practices by the interaction of global, national and local actors, emphasising that outcomes of such interactions are shaped very much by specific contexts. Of particular importance here is the role of the state as a site through which these interactions and tensions may be played out. In his chapter on the Australian music industry, for example, David Rowe shows how unexpected political alliances around music import restrictions and copyright legislation have arisen, with old models of left and right politics having little influence. Similarly, in their chapter on gender equity in Australian amateur sport, Jim McKay and his co-authors argue that policies aimed at promoting gender equity have been constrained both by practices of hegemonic masculinity and by the neo-liberal state based project of integrating the Australian economy, and sport, into the global economy. Other contributors, including Tom O'Regan on cinema, Jennifer Craik on tourism, Terry Smith on the visual arts, Tim Rowse on H C Coombs, David Carter and Key Ferres on literature, and Robin Trotter on regionalism and cultural development, also explore different dimensions of relationships between cultural and media practice and national institutions, including in particular the state. Read together, ultimately they present a strong case for the need for well-grounded studies of local and national contexts, if we are to understand the impact of globalisation on culture and media.

A second contribution of the book is to show how social relations such as race (in chapters by Chris Healy, Nicholas Thomas, and Helen Molnar), ethnicity (James Jupp), age (Catharine Lumby), and class (Tony Bennett and his co-authors) remain central to questions of culture, but are also being transformed through the integration of Australian cultural processes into a global society. Particularly significant in the context of studies of culture in Australia is the emphasis in Part Three on the relationship between race and cultural policy making, production and consumption. To take just one example, Molnar explores how conflicts among state officials have impacted negatively on the production and delivery of indigenous media, in particular where policy makers have operated with stereotypes of indigenous people as only living in remote areas, assuming that urban and rural indigenous Australians live within the dominant framework of non-indigenous Australia. Taken together, these chapters show the significance of analysing contemporary institutional practices and historical legacies when seeking to understand emerging cultural interactions across

global, national and local contexts. In this way, these chapters open the door for future research to take a more comparative approach, analysing for example the commonalities and divergences in indigenous media in different countries, and teasing out the contextual factors around race that have influenced common and specific modes of organisation and reorganisation.

A third set of arguments running through the book concern the search for [160] ways of theorising at a general level about media and culture. Whereas Louw takes hegemony as an overarching theoretical lens through which to explore contemporary media forms, the contributions by Gay Hawkins and Graeme Turner in particular argue for the development of case studies which emphasise detail and contingency. Hawkins' argues that whereas most approaches to the media tend to focus on it as a coherent field through which processes of social regulation occur, there is now a need to analyse the media as a dispersed set of sites where particular practices of governance are played out in specific ways. While the emphasis on detailed case studies is welcome, especially in relation to the media, Louw's use of hegemony is a very good example of how a general theoretical concept can provide insights into global processes.

Taken together, the books by Louw and by Bennett and Carter are suggestive of the continuing relevance of formal and informal national and local institutions in exploring contemporary media and cultural production, policies and practices, and of the need to engage with both political economy and cultural modes of analysis if we are to understand emerging trends. Taken together, they also raise the significant challenge for researchers of undertaking theoretically informed but empirically grounded research that is sensitive to the interaction of global, national and local contexts.