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Researching Media Management and Media Economics: Methodological Approaches and Issues

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1. Introduction

This paper, which draws heavily on a chapter by the authors for the forthcoming *Handbook of Media Management and Economics* (Albarran, 2005), focuses on potential methodological challenges facing scholars interested in the economics of cultural industries and, especially, economics of media. Drawing on previous work by economic researchers, it examines what is unusual or special about economics of media and what sorts of distinctive problems may emerge in the course of applying conventional economic theory to the activities of media or other culturally creative sectors. Our paper examines some of the approaches taken towards carrying out research in media economics and likely limitations and pitfalls that may be encountered and it considers whether such problems act as a deterrent to scholarly work in our field.

1.1 Media Economics – an increasingly popular field

Those interested in media economics will be well aware that the number of scholars working on (and students following courses in) media management and media economics has expanded dramatically over recent years. Several reasons may account for this including heightened interest in the transformative effects of digitization and related processes of convergence and globalization. The simultaneous deregulation of national media industries has meant that the attention of both policy makers and media academics has shifted from political to economic issues. At the same time the media have become increasingly important as businesses and as potential employers of ambitious MBAs. Put these changes together and there are a number of new demands for teaching and research focused on the specific economic and management problems raised by media business practice.

For media and communications studies departments, economics and management can no longer be treated as irrelevant. For economics departments and business schools, the media can no longer be regarded as marginal. For policy makers, the impacts of media companies on the national economy (on employment, the balance of payments, on competitiveness and growth) are of increasing importance for economic management. For media entrepreneurs and executives, the problems of managing talent and intellectual property, of retaining and building markets, of operating in a global economy, of responding or not to new technological temptations are ever more complex. Even consumers now face increasingly complicated decisions as to what resources to invest in what media product or experience, as choices of what to buy and how to pay for it proliferate. 'Media management' and 'media economics' may be relatively new subject areas and may have an uneasy relationship with their parent disciplines but their importance is undeniable and there is certainly abundant opportunity now for researchers to develop knowledge and shape the analytic concepts of these emerging fields of enquiry.

1.2 But also a challenging one!

Most (but not all) research carried out in media management and economics is premised on the assumption that the media industry is different from others. The business of communicating with mass audiences--supplying ideas, information and entertainment to segments of the public--is different from supplying motorcars or pizzas because media output has the potential to impact seriously, whether for better or worse, on public welfare. One of the major intellectual challenges that researchers in our field often find themselves grappling with is diversity or even conflict in the expectations that surround the function of media resource management. Conventional economic theories do not necessarily provide an adequate framework when it comes to the analysis of media companies' market strategies (or even, indeed, the nature of their 'failure' or 'success'). If they did, the rationale for distinguishing media management and media economics as special fields of enquiry would be considerably diminished! At the same time, and to a different degree than in other industries, media management involves coping with 'irrationalities'. For example, the economic importance of personal resources such as 'talent' and 'star quality' are not easily embraced nor explained by conventional theories about economic value and rational market behaviour.

If one set of problems facing researchers stems from the limitations of generic economic and managerial theories, another challenge is that, by and large, media management and media economics are at an early stage of developing alternative analytical frameworks. Some useful work has been carried out by economists in developing heuristic models that take account of the special contingencies of media provision but much of the research work conducted in media management is about creating valuable knowledge for and about industry. It does not necessarily help to develop the subject's overall intellectual or theoretical coherence. A tendency towards applied and practical work inevitably means that, when compared with more developed and longer-established fields of enquiry, relatively little exists in the way of a prevailing paradigm in either media management or media economics. And, at the same time, there remain significant gaps in empirical knowledge (about media labour markets, for example) which have made it difficult to develop overall unifying theories of media structures.

The challenges faced by researchers in media management and economics, which are discussed in more detail below, can also be viewed as opportunities. One of the obvious characteristics of media management is its interdisciplinarity. It provides a meeting point for a range of disciplines (economics, management studies, political science and sociology) that each have their own research questions, theoretical concerns and methodological traditions. Media management has grown in recent years from a subject area comprising a small number of scholars working on topics deriving from their own particular disciplinary backgrounds to a substantive interdisciplinary field in its own right with its own journals and subject associations. And the management of media resources remains a compelling focus for research whose potential to contribute to public understanding of socio-political, cultural and economic systems is increasingly recognised.

2. The nature of research in media management and economics

Good research, irrespective of its discipline, depends on the quality of the question posed as much as getting an answer to it. Here are some examples of the sorts of issues that scholars in media economics and management might be concerned with:

Do media firms produce the sorts of goods and services that consumers want and need? Are they supplied in the right quantities and under conditions of optimal efficiency? What is the association between the markets in which media firms operate and how they perform? How can managers of media firms ensure that the resources available for provision of media goods are used as effectively as possible? What special challenges are thrown up by the management of creative processes? Which strategies will ensure that new media technologies are used to best competitive effect? What role should the state play in ensuring that the organisation and supply of media output matches societal needs?

Each of these questions is, of course, too broad to put into operation as a specific research question and each has been investigated many times over in the past. In arriving at a question that is *researchable*, it is essential to distinguish between wider issues related to media management that may provide the overarching context for a study and the specific topic investigation of which offers a real chance to add to what is known already.

Arriving at a question is, of course, easy if the topic is chosen for you. Much research related to the management and economics of media can be found not in the academic literature but in management reports and surveys carried out by and within media businesses and public policy offices. Research matters a great deal to the media industry; it is an essential tool of media policy makers. Audience, box office and sales figures, for example, are central to the production decisions of the music, film, radio, television, publishing and advertising industries. They determine what programmes are made, which records are released, what films are funded; they shape promotional strategies and inform decisions as to how much money should be invested in each new work. Specialist researchers are employed by media firms and media sectors of industry precisely to bring a scientific approach to the analysis of the uncertainties (or irrationality) of taste and talent. Research data is equally important in debates about media policy and regulation, for example, concerning the social effects of particular forms of output or the market consequences of cross-media ownership.

In practice, then, the choice of a research question depends on whom the research is for. When research is carried out directly on behalf of a client (a media organisation, for example, or a policy-making body), the agenda is usually clear. Client research can provide relatively generous budgets and may give the researcher access to sensitive management data that would otherwise not be available. However, it is worth remembering that a client's question is itself often ideologically formed and may well involve assumptions about what counts as evidence and how it should be interpreted. In addition, some would argue that client research tends to produce the answers that clients want to hear, that confirms the wisdom of existing policies or plays well in terms of preferred strategies or office politics. From an academic perspective, whatever advantages clients bring in terms of resources and access may well be outweighed by the disadvantages of an unsatisfactory brief or possible risk of suppressed findings.

Other research questions in the media field are driven by the curiosity or interest of the researcher rather than by client needs or policy relevance. Curiosity can simply reflect personal interests and experiences or it may stem from dissatisfaction with existing disciplinary theories of how the media should be assessed economically or managed effectively. It can derive from an urge to test or challenge an assertion, to fill a gap in knowledge, or to apply an existing argument to new data. In all such cases, if to differing degrees, 'curiosity' describes a response to a perceived problem in the relationship of a theory (of a given business practice in the media sector, say) to reality. This concern with how theory relates to practice is one of the main factors distinguishing academic from client-based research.

In research that is driven by academic curiosity, the researcher has the freedom (depending on available resources) to determine what methods will be used to collect and analyse data. Of course, each method involves opportunity costs and alternative methods will produce different kinds of evidence. Some of the more commonly used sources of data and tools for investigation in media management and economics are considered below.

2.1 Documents and Texts

Official data that is available in the public domain is an extremely valuable resource for researchers in our field. Indispensable economic media data is usually available, for example, from industry regulators such as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the USA or, in the UK, the Independent Television Commission (ITC), Oftel (the regulator for telecommunications) or the Copyright Tribunal.[i] Legal rulings and documentation related to, for example, official inquiries by competition authorities are another potential source of relevant economic data.

In addition to the local economic data that may be gleaned from official bodies at the national level, much relevant economic data is also gathered by international policy-making or trade bodies such as the OECD and the World Trade Organisation. At the regional level, the Directorate of the European Commission concerned with audiovisual policy, DG15, has published numerous surveys, reports, policy communications and other documents containing up-to-date statistics and a range of other valuable information about the television and film industries both in Europe and globally.[ii] Anyone starting a research project in media management or media economics needs to begin by becoming familiar with what information is already available from such official sources.

Much of this official data is nowadays made available on the various bodies' websites and the Internet has become a very valuable research tool for media management researchers. Indeed, most of the originators of official media industry data, whether public or trade bodies, whether national or international, have websites on which information about reports and publications (and, often, full documents in a downloadable form) are readily available.

Each sector of the media has its own national and international professional associations and trade organisations (such as the Motion Picture Exporters Association of America, European Publishers Union, the Radio Advertising Bureau or the International Federation of Phonograph Industries) and many of these bodies publish reports, newsletters and surveys on the web. Professional research companies that are specifically hired or created by media industries to research their markets and audiences are another potentially good source of secondary data. The headline sales and audience figures produced by companies such as Neilsen or BARB are usually placed in the public domain and more data may be available at websites or reproduced in industry journals.

The central focus for a good deal of media management research is the firm. Documentary information about media firms is available from a variety of sources including, most obviously (but not always most easily), the firms themselves. In most countries, companies are required by law to produce annual reports that convey basic financial information about recent trading, assets, directors, etc. and these financial reports and accounts are accessible to the public.

Whatever the value of all this documentation, however, it remains evident that much of the detailed financial and management data that is of particular interest to scholars of media management and economics does not exist. Or, when it does, it is contained in documents that are not in the public domain. Monthly performance reviews, dissections of operating costs, and the sort of management data that would allow a media company's operations to be analysed in close detail are generally not open to the gaze of outsiders (nor, understandably, to rivals). The determined researcher can only get access to this sort of data by negotiating with or talking to its gatekeepers.

2.2 People

One of the most important sources of information about management practices in the media industry is, of course, people. In order to gather information from media managers or other industry practitioners, the two most commonly used research methods are interviews and questionnaires. Other potentially useful methods include observation and focus groups.

Both interviews and questionnaires represent a means of getting information directly from people, whether media producers or consumers, media executives or regulators. The advantage of a questionnaire survey is that it is a relatively economical way of gathering information from a large number of people in a form that is comparable (in the way that the information is recorded) and that can be aggregated. The disadvantage of the questionnaire is that it produces standardised data that is constructed by the questionnaire itself.

An interview, on the other hand, has the advantage of capturing deeper and more open-ended information. The interviewee determines the narrative and findings can be unexpected. But carrying out interviews is a very time-consuming way of gathering data. For example, Preston's recent investigation (2003) of the culture and practices of television programme commissioning in the UK involving 70 in-depth interviews with relevant programme-makers and broadcasting personnel was carried out over a year-long period. The other major disadvantage is that information is gathered in a way that can make comparison difficult; by its nature, interview material tends to stress the uniqueness of an individual's experience.

The choice between carrying out interviews or conducting a questionnaire survey depends on what the researcher hopes to do with the information. If a very clear statement of the research problem can be established from the outset then it makes sense to adopt a technique that essentially limits the information you gather, especially if the aim is to make generalisations (about managerial behaviour or attitudes, say). If, on the other hand, research is exploratory, or aimed at clarifying a question, then interviews might be a more appropriate technique. The ideal research design probably involves a combination of both techniques and, indeed, many research studies in media management have done exactly that. This allows questionnaires to be designed on the basis of information gathered from interviews or, alternatively, interviews can be used to test conclusions drawn from questionnaires. Limitations on time and other resources, however, do often mean that a researcher has to choose one method or another.

Another valuable research tool available to the media management researcher is observation. Whereas interviews and questionnaires are necessarily 'obtrusive' methods of getting information from people, observation may be 'unobtrusive' and allow information to be gathered from people in the course of their normal working lives.

In research related to media economics and media management, observation can be a better research method than interviews or questionnaires for two kinds of reasons. First, it can get directly at information (about work practices, for example) that individuals don't provide in interviews or surveys either because they don't know it, or because they can't articulate it, or because they regard it as commercially sensitive and not be divulged to strangers. Second, there is a category of institutional knowledge, a knowledge of norms of behaviour and networks that is so taken for granted that individuals don't know they know it!

Prolonged immersion in the settings where processes of media production and distribution take place allow the researcher to gain first hand knowledge of how individuals go about their normal work activities and how those activities are managed. For example, to sit in a newsroom or on a newsdesk over a long enough period of time is to get first-hand knowledge of the processes of news creation and delivery. Philip Schlesinger's work on the creation of broadcast news within the BBC relied on an extensive period of participant observation in the 1970s.(Schlesinger 1978) [iii] Schlesinger's later analysis of this experience highlights one of the potential drawbacks of participant observation: 'The process whereby I got under the BBC's skin was also one whereby it got under mine' (1980:353). If the researcher becomes too immersed in or captivated by the view of the world held by the subject of research, by the corporate ideology of the media firm being investigated, then the analytical detachment essential to good research may be compromised or lost. The main problem with observation as a research tool, however, is its cost. Extended observation over a long period of time is both time consuming and time intensive and it is not easy to gain such access to media organisations, especially in the commercial sector. In practice, observation is almost always used with other methods (usually interviews) either in advance (as a way of determining who to talk to about what), afterwards (as a means of checking the meaning of interview data) or in parallel (as in the use of 'key informants' in ethnography).

2.3 Quantitative and Qualitative analysis

Existing research studies in media management and economics exemplify a range of analytical approaches, quantitative and qualitative (and often both). Quantitative research is centrally concerned with measurement. Results of questionnaire surveys or of highly structured interviews or numerical and statistical data gathered from primary or secondary sources are equally open to quantitative analysis. At the same time, the systems through which media output is created, supplied and consumed cannot always be reduced satisfactorily to an inert set of measurable regularities. There will always be an important role for qualitative research techniques in media management research, for data produced by the methods discussed in the last section (interviews; participant observation; the examination of documents).

In qualitative research, the emphasis tends to be on individuals' interpretations of their environments or events taking place within their environment, of their own behaviour or that of others. Qualitative research is well suited to investigating work practices and managerial styles, and carrying out organisational research. The analysis and presentation of qualitative findings allow nuances and contexts to be taken into account. Qualitative methods give the researcher a way of understanding what is going on within media organisations from the perspective of participants (rather than simply according to the researcher's academic assumptions) (Bryman, 1995:29-30).

Some qualitative techniques used in management research have, by now, been effectively systematised. For example, so-called 'strategic management' studies have developed a variety of tools for analysing the business environment. Here we find the familiar application of SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) and PEST or PESTEL (political, economic, social, technical, environmental, legal) analyses, which can be as readily applied to media as to any other firms. See, for example, Helgesen's work on internationalisation of Norwegian newspaper firms, which uses both a SWOT analysis of the Norwegian newspaper industry as a whole as well as individual case studies of three of its largest players. (Helgesen, 2002: 123-38) At their most basic level, such strategic management models mean listing under prescribed headings all the issues that may affect a particular organisation. Implementation of these models requires, as a first step, the use of qualitative research methods to gather as much data as possible about that organisation and its business environment.

On the other hand, the quantitative techniques predominant in many branches of economics are equally essential in addressing research questions related to the management of the media. Raw data obtained and analysed in the correct way can provide vital information about audiences or advertising patterns, about productivity and profitability, about many of the processes involved in the production and supply of media content. Quantitative data gathered by questionnaire surveys or from published sources can be analysed using a variety of techniques. For single variables much can be revealed by basic calculations of averages or measures of spread such as standard deviation or, where two or more variables are involved, through the use of correlation coefficients. Correlation and regression techniques are the basis of a range of tools used in management and economics for estimating and forecasting. Comparative evaluations of the business performance of media companies also typically rely on quantitative techniques, for example on comparisons of profitability or return on capital employed (ROCE). Quantitative approaches such as the calculation of net present value or the internal rate of return are as widely used to evaluate and compare investment choices in the media business as in any other industry.

Many of the quantitative tools available to media management researchers, in other words, are the same as in any other branch of economics even if the subject of analysis (audience and advertising data, for example) is different. Straightforward correlation analysis is, for instance, is frequently used in research on the relationship between the variables that interest media managers and media economists (such as audience satisfaction levels and particular product attributes, or organisational structure and output). Bakker's recent work mapping changes in readership and shifts in the newspaper market caused by the arrival of free titles provides another example of a familiar quantitative approach--a substitution/cumulation model—being applied to a media topic. In this model, circulation data (primarily gathered from secondary sources) is used to calculate the extent to which a new market entrant causes consumers to change their purchasing behaviour. (Bakker, 2002:80). The questions here—Do new products substitute for old ones? To what extent are both are used at the same time? Does the whole market expand? —are obviously of general importance in such a technologically sensitive sector as the media.

Some quantitative approaches are unique to the study of media. For example, a study carried out by Golding and colleagues at Loughborough University monitored the content of all national press and broadcasting news bulletins in the UK for the two-year period from 1997-1999. 'In that period, 86,987 news items were coded, from 3,550 separate media.' (Golding, 2000:10) The categorisation and coding of these items according to a range of key characteristics enabled researchers to carry out quantitative analysis from which significant conclusions could be drawn about patterns and trends within the British news agenda.

Another research issue from which analytic models particular to media economics have emerged concerns media concentration and diversity. Starting from traditional techniques for categorising and quantifying media content (i.e. content analysis), it is possible to develop measures of content 'diversity' and then to correlate these with patterns of media ownership, on the one hand, and with profiles of consumer taste and preference on the other (Van Cuilenburg, 2000: 52-6). Such quantitative analysis is a way of uncovering the relationship between media diversity and competitive market structures (ibid: 57-8). Hence studies of the link between diversity in programme scheduling strategies and the number and ownership of competing broadcasters (Owen & Wildman, 1992) or between 'market concentration and homogeneity of the cultural product' in the music industry (Peterson and Berger, 1975).

Indeed, how media firms behave under different market structures has been a concern for many media economists (Albarran, 1996; Alexander et al, 1998; Picard, 1989; 2002; Wirth & Bloch, 1995). But defining media markets and measuring the degree of concentrated ownership within them is no easy task. Traditional concentration indices and ratios such as the Herfindahl-Hirschman Index can be used but some interesting developmental approaches taken by media researchers go beyond this to try to capture a closer understanding of where and how control over media provision is located (Van Cuilenburg, 2000).

2.4 Case Studies

Case studies are commonly used as a research as well as a teaching tool in management and business studies. To understand in depth how an industry works does not necessarily mean researching a large number of cases. The case study approach involves illuminating a given issue or phenomenon through the detailed examination of one instance of it. This approach is common in media management research because the unit of analysis is often the organisation or firm. The complexity of organisational phenomena can be such that a case study provides by far the best sort of data. It is also useful in conducting exploratory research, when the aim is to gain insights about, say, areas of organisational activity that are not yet well documented or understood and that can only be teased out through prolonged, detailed and multi-layered scrutiny.

The problem with case studies, however, is that they don't provide a sufficient basis for scientific generalisation. Examining procedures and practices in one particular context or within one particular firm (with all its innate idiosyncrasies) may well produce data that has no wider truth or significance. The problem, to put this another way, is that the researcher has no way of knowing whether or not a case if 'typical' - whether this particular media firm's management of its resources tells us anything about media management in general. Of course, a case study is not intended to work as a sample of one. Instead, it is about facilitating a more thorough and multi-faceted analysis of a particular process or a series of events than would be possible through any alternative research strategy.

Case studies are not always confined to one subject of analysis. For example, the comparative approach taken by Albarran and Moellinger (2002:103-122) in their analysis of the structure and performance of the top six communication industry firms might arguably be described as case study rather than survey research - it combines elements of both. The evidence from multiple cases might be considered more compelling or robust than that from a single case projects but it has drawbacks. Multiple-case research study is far more time-consuming and may well work against achieving the very depth and detail for which the case study approach was developed in the first place.

3. Problems and Pitfalls

Researchers in the fields of media management and media economics are likely to encounter not only the usual practical and theoretical challenges associated with all research but also particular problems that derive from the distinctive nature of their area of enquiry. As Alan Peacock observed some years ago, studies of the broadcasting industry that involve '[t]he intrusion of economic analysis' may be confronted by both practical problems (such as the shortage of relevant econometric data) and conceptual pitfalls (how does one measure programme quality or viewer welfare?) (Peacock 1989: 3-4) Cave summarised the problems associated with conducting normative economic analysis of the television as follows:

'Firstly, the public good property of programmes and transmissions means that once we move away from the world of the omniscient planner capable of providing an efficient bundle of outputs into the world of private provision, we are at once in "second best" country, where results are both hard to come by and special. Secondly, television is an industry which many people feel should be governed by something other than current household preferences.' (Cave 1989: 35)

Problems of this sort can crop up in research related to any sector of the media. As has been discussed elsewhere (Doyle, 2002: 10-11), the fact that media and other 'cultural' output has qualities not shared by other products and services means that the application of economic theory to the media faces a number of unique challenges. Indeed, media output seems to defy the very premise on which the laws of economics are based – scarcity. However much a film, a song or a television programme is consumed, it doesn't ever get used up. Also, its market value as a fashion item isn't predictable—a song or film or programme can be more valuable as a 'classic' than it was as a new release.

Economics is about promoting 'efficiency' in the allocation of resources. The notion of economic efficiency is inextricably tied up with objectives. But the objectives of media organisations tend to vary widely. Many media organisations do indeed comply with the classical theory of the firm and, like commercial entities in any other industry, are primarily geared towards maximising profits and satisfying shareholders. A good number of other media organisations, however, even in the commercial sector, appear to be driven by alternative motives (hence the terms 'alternative' or 'independent' applied to record, film, magazine or television production companies that are not simply concerned with maximising financial returns). For companies operating in the public service sector, quality of output and other 'public service' objectives (such as diversity of output, meeting minority audience needs, etc) are an end in themselves. And some broadcasting firms find themselves operating in between the market and the non-market sectors, having to fulfil one set of objectives for an industry regulator, and another set for shareholders. Because objectives are both hazy and varied, the application of any all-embracing model based in conventional economic theory to the media business is very difficult.

The central unit of analysis for much research in media economics and media management is the firm. Researchers in our field want to know whether media organisations and the resources they are utilising are being managed efficiently. We want to compare the performance of media organisations in different circumstances. The task of establishing an appropriate performance measure for firms is, though, bedevilled by what Wirth and Bloch (1995: 18) describe as the 'multidimensional' nature of performance, and this is particularly a problem in media analysis. In any organisation, different constituencies--shareholders, senior management, employees, customers, 'the public'—are likely to have different ideas about what the organisation's goals are, or ought to be. But this is especially true in industries involved in cultural provision. Despite some attempts to develop all-embracing models specifically for the media industry (see, for example, Hendriks 1995), the problem remains that there is no easy way of conceiving or operationalising research aimed at quantifying the overall economic performance or effectiveness of media firms.

Other challenges to economic research on the media industry stem from 'distorted' mechanisms and the nature of market 'failure'. In free-market economies, most decisions concerning resource allocation are made through the price system. But the relationship between price and resource allocation in the media is somewhat unusual, most obviously in broadcasting where (notwithstanding the growth of subscription-based channels) many of the services consumers receive still do not involve a direct payment from the viewer. Without price as a direct link between consumers and producers, there is a fundamental failure in the usual means of registering consumer preferences with suppliers. And even where money does change hands the pricing mechanism may be peculiar: the price of media goods like CDs or cinema admissions is rarely related to the cost of producing this particular record or film; most magazines' profit figures are determined by advertising rather than consumer sales—the cost of the magazine in the shop does not necessarily tell us anything about its consumer value.

In terms of economics, production methods are said to be inefficient if it would be possible to produce more of at least one commodity - without simultaneously producing less of another - by merely reallocating resources. However, when it comes to the production of media output, this theoretical approach doesn't work particularly well. For example, it might well be possible for a television company to re-distribute its resources so as to produce more hours of programming output or bigger audiences for the same cost as before. But if, at the same time, this were to reduce the diversity or quality of media output (or the aggregate utility or welfare generated by this output), could it be said to be a more efficient use of resources? Media output can be classified and quantified in numerous ways but translating this data into welfare impacts or utility is extremely problematic.

And, again, even without considering welfare issues, the 'irrationality' of the media market makes it difficult to measure the efficiency of production in conventional ways. All media industries operate on the basis of cross subsidy. It has long been calculated, for example, that only about 1 out of 11 records released covers its costs (and a similar ratio seems to be applicable to books). Much investment in the film and television industries is in the development of scripts and programmes that are not made, or if made not released, or if released not promoted, or if promoted not viewed! All such films and programmes are ‘failures’ but they don’t therefore necessarily indicate the ‘inefficient’ use of resources, given the profit ratio on the output that is successful and the difficulty in predicting how markets will respond. A company that produces one global best-seller or box office smash and ten loss-making records or films is likely to have far higher returns than a company that produces records or films that all just cover their costs. Analysing ‘rational’ economic production policy in the media market is thus a research ambition fraught with difficulty.

As we’ve already discussed, one problem that stems from the focus on the firm is getting access to the relevant data. This, of course, is not confined to media research but applies to organisational studies more generally. ‘Many organisations are resistant to being studied, possibly because they are suspicious about the aims of the researcher. Further, those persons that act as “gatekeepers” between the researcher and the organisation (usually fairly senior managers) are likely to be concerned about the amount of their own and others’ time that is likely to be consumed by the investigation.’ (Bryman, 1995: 2) The point to add here is that because some media firms are relatively willing to open their doors to scholarly research whereas other steadfastly refuse, media management or economic theory is in danger of being developed on the basis of systematically unrepresentative findings. (ibid.3) There is no doubt in Britain, for example, that the BBC has been much more open to researchers than any other broadcasting company. How has this affected our understanding of the television firm?

The problem here is not just which firms are more or less research accessible, but which individuals in these firms. For example, only a limited number of people within an organisation are in a position to explain how its strategy is devised, how systems for implementing change work, and so forth. These individuals may or may not be willing to share their knowledge. Deciding at what level to carry out the study may pose problems and, when data is collected at more than one level (e.g. from journalists and editors) new problems arise relating to aggregation and how to deal with conflicting accounts.

The focus on relatively small samples of media companies and their managers--particularly in, say, Masters level research projects for which time and other resources are limited—can raise questions about validity and reliability. In many sectors of the media, access to just two or three leading companies may well provide a data sample that collectively accounts for a highly significant market share. But reliance on too few companies or individuals can leave doubts about the general significance of research findings even when they are based on the study of major corporations.

There is no doubt that unlike media research in some other disciplines (sociology, for example), research in media management and media economics can involve a heavy reliance on secondary sources. Studies may be centred around analysis of the financial or trading statements published by media companies on the web and elsewhere. Studies may involve analysis of secondary audience data or information about circulation figures, advertising revenues or sales. Research may be focused on information compiled by relevant trade associations or bodies representing a sector or on industry studies and reports compiled by management or business consultants, by investment analysts or lobby groups. One potentially serious pitfall is to overlook or fail to properly assess factors liable to distort or undermine the reliability of secondary source data. For example, analysis of company documentation and data set out on company websites must bring to bear a critical understanding that the primary purpose of this ‘information’ is to present the company, its activities and its progress as favourably as possible to customers, shareholders and the wider public.

The final problem with which researchers in media management may have to be concerned is temporal validity (Bryman, 1995: 241). The subject of an investigation will, on occasion, change in such a way as to reduce the validity and relevance of findings that have emerged from it.[iv] Media organisations evolve constantly. A case study analysis of an organisation carried out in one particular time frame may subsequently be discovered to capture events in an uncharacteristic or incomplete state. Temporal validity is a special concern for media researchers because of the industry's reliance on technology. Research focused on 'new' production and distribution devices inevitably bears the risk of being overtaken by events. It is a fact of life in media management research that findings valid at one moment may no longer pertain at the next.

4. Conclusions

Research in media management and media economics covers a wide diversity of themes. Studies in these fields have concerned themselves with all aspects of media organisations and their management, with the use of resources in media production and distribution, with the markets in which media firms operate, and with their wider economic environment. There is certainly research concerned with theoretical and philosophical questions and the general advance of a new academic discipline, but most research studies in the field are probably still 'applied', looking at specific problems in specific companies or industry sectors. The diversity of the resulting work reflects the use of a wide range of methodologies and intellectual approaches, drawing on sociology and political science as well as management studies and economics. We hope to have made clear in the preceding discussion that no single methodological approach can be regarded as 'standard'. In the end, carrying out good research depends most importantly on the ability to recognise the strengths and weaknesses of alternative methods in the specific context of a chosen question.

Conducting research in these areas of enquiry is not without its problems. In this paper we have touched on some of these, such as the absence of unifying theories, the difficulty of accessing relevant data, the limitations associated with the measurement of organisational and managerial effectiveness, the obstacles to data aggregation, and the drawbacks of taking snapshots of an industry that is almost always, for technological reasons, in a state of flux. Another kind of problem that deserves a final mention is the odd status of research in the industry itself. Because, in the management of creative processes, irrational qualities (instinct, gut feeling etc) are more likely to be cited in explaining decisions than the application of management science models, academics may sometimes have a difficult job explaining why their kind of media research might matter to media practitioners.

The intellectual and practical challenges confronting those interested in media management and economics should not be regarded, however, as a deterrent to scholarly research. On the contrary, such challenges have inspired and continue to inspire the development of innovative research that explores the economic, financial, managerial and social aspects of the media industry. Existing research is both a valuable resource for future researchers and an example of the rich opportunities to contribute to existing knowledge and to shape the evolution of the fields of media management and media economics.

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[i] The Communications Act 2003 provides for a major reorganisation of regulation in the UK whereby the responsibilities of ITC, Radio Authority and Oftel are to be passed to a new ‘converged’ broadcasting and telecommunications regulator called OFCOM.

[ii] These reports are available through the Commission’s ‘audiovisual’ website.

[iii] For a recent example of a similar ethnographic study of the BBC (including its News and Current Affairs production) see Born (2004).

[iv] One of us (Simon Frith) has experienced this somewhat embarrassing problem directly. Between researching and publishing my study of the British rock music industry (Frith 1978), EMI changed from being an exemplification of the success of a managerial strategy of vertical integration to being a company in crisis (following the 1970s oil crisis and the beginning of the shift from vinyl to CD production).