University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Departmental Papers (ASC)

Annenberg School for Communication

April 1982

# Producing TV's World: How Important Is Community, an Essay Review

Joseph Turow
*University of Pennsylvania*, Jturow@asc.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers

Recommended Citation
Turow, J. (1982). Producing TV's World: How Important Is Community, an Essay Review. *Journal of Communication, 32* (2), 186-193.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1982.tb00505.x

NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Joseph Turow was affiliated with Purdue University. Currently January 2008, he is a faculty member of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/32
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

# Producing TV's World: How Important Is Community, an Essay Review

**Abstract**
Two views of the televisionl film business examine the media's New York-California connection.
*Up the Tube: Prime Time Television in the Silverman Years* by Sally Bedell. New York: Viking, 1981.
*Media Made in California: Hollywood, Politics, and the News* by Jeremy Tunstall and David Walker. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

**Comments**
NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Joseph Turow was affiliated with Purdue University. Currently January 2008, he is a faculty member of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

This journal article is available at ScholarlyCommons: http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/32

# *Producing TV's World: How Important is Community?*

an essay review by Joseph Turow

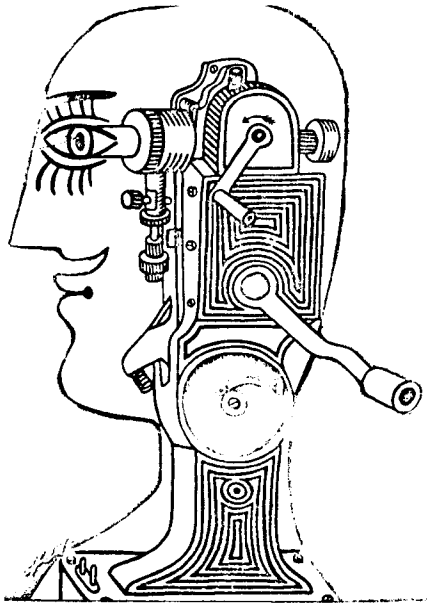
***Two views of the television/film business examine the media's New York–California connection.***

*Up the Tube: Prime Time Television in the Silverman Years* by Sally Bedell. New York: Viking, 1981.
*Media Made in California: Hollywood, Politics, and the News* by Jeremy Tunstall and David Walker. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

"The function of Paris," Victor Hugo reportedly stated, "is the dispersion of the idea. Her duty is to shake down upon the world a never ending handful of truths."[1] Certainly, much has been written about the role Paris and other cities have played in the development and cultivation of artistic communities. Chroniclers of American arts have described, for example, how the French capital stood as a richly creative refuge for an avowedly "lost" generation of American writers and painters after the First World War (see 4 and 7); how Harlem and New Orleans at various times served as wellsprings for the development of jazz and its descendants (5, 6, 8); how Greenwich Village and San Francisco provided sparks and sustenance for, respectively, a "beat" generation and a "flower" generation that stood in question of American values and redirected the nation's poetic sensibilities (1, 3). What seems clear in each of the accounts is that a city—its physical makeup, its history, and its lifestyle—played an integral part in shaping and sustain-

[1] The phrase and its attribution to Victor Hugo were part of a contemporary painting in a recent Indianapolis art exhibition.

Joseph Turow is Associate Professor in the Department of Communications, Purdue University.



ing the artistic community that settled there and the material that the community produced.

While scholars of highbrow literature and painting, and of folk-driven music, have tended to point to the influence of community and location in those creative endeavors, mass communication researchers have tended to shy away from emphasizing such connections in discussing the mainstream television, record, magazine, radio, newspaper, and film industries. Historians of mass media in the U.S. do sometimes bow to the good weather, cheap labor, and favorable legal climate in explaining the film industry's gravitation to the Los Angeles area. They also nod to New York's place as a business and cultural capital in explaining the radio networks' decisions to base their operations there. However, observations along these lines tend to be relegated to discussion of the mass media industry's origin, not its ongoing activity.

One might think that the obvious exception has been "Hollywood," that virtual synonym for parts of Los Angeles related to film and television. Yet most writing on the lifestyles of film and television creators have been of the gossipy sort, and most lengthy sociological descriptions of the production of TV and movie material have avoided using the contemporary life in Los Angeles of producers, writers, actors, and network executives as an important explanation for the inception, development, and exhibition of material. Organizational reward systems; organizational routines and requirements; colleague and co-worker rapport and pressures; technological, logistical, and time constraints; powerful entities in the organizations' environments—these

interrelated factors have been observed in various kinds of mass production companies to be the keys to understanding what goes on. Still, the extended reference of anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker to Hollywood as a community, in her 1951 classic work *Hollywood: The Dream Factory* (9), stands in potentially provocative counterpoint to the emerging orientation:

> *The geographical location of any community always has important social implications, and Hollywood is no exception. . . . Although Los Angeles stretches in distance for eighty-five miles and has a population of approximately four million, the whole of it is dominated by Hollywood* . . . (p. 17).

To what extent do the communities in which producers of mass media content live influence the specific nature of the content—and in what ways? Unfortunately, beyond implying that community and geography influence film content, Powdermaker did not deal with this issue. Rather, her book explored the organization of the Hollywood movie colony and the ways in which popular "myths" about it match reality. It is unfortunate, too, that in the thirty years since Powdermaker's statement, the question it seems to urge has seldom been broached systematically. The publication of *Media Made in California: Hollywood, Politics, and the News* by Jeremy Tunstall and David Walker and *Up the Tube: Prime Time Television in the Silverman Years* by Sally Bedell provides a rare opportunity to examine the issue directly.

***Bedell's book gives no aid or comfort to those who would argue the influence of community or geography in Los Angeles or New York on the production of prime-time television fare.***

To the contrary, *Up the Tube*'s portrait of television decision-making fits quite nicely into the organizational and interorganizational frameworks that researchers of the production of mass media culture have been developing. As the subtitle notes, the book's focus is on the period in which Fred Silverman dominated the programming departments at, successively, CBS, ABC, and NBC. Those familiar with Les Brown's *Television: The Business Behind the Box* (2) will find that Bedell's book is in a large sense a sequel to that 1971 classic; Bedell admits as much by invoking in her first chapter some images and incidents that Brown uses in his.

But while Les Brown's book is a memoir of one reporter's coverage of one year on New York's broadcast row, Bedell's book is a more sweeping tale of prime-time television from the late 1960s through the late 1970s, told against the background of Fred Silverman's professional life. The

canvas is rather broad, but so was the territory on which Silverman played during his decade and a half near or at the competitive center of network television. Following Silverman at the top means following TV programming, whether in the early 1970s, when he helped maintain and strengthen CBS's prime-time lead; in the mid-1970s, when he emerged as the leader of an ABC programming team that catapulted ABC to the front of the ratings race; or in the late 1970s, when he joined NBC as its president with a mandate to boost that network's sagging ratings and profits.

To say as much is not, however, to say that television was the way it was solely, or even largely, because of Fred Silverman. In the course of the past decade it did become fashionable for the general press to praise or damn Silverman for the fortunes of his network or the state of television as a whole. Bedell's reconstruction of the "Silverman years"—evidently based on industry trade paper reports augmented by interviews—refutes such simplistic evaluations.

The account does show indisputably that Silverman was a powerful force in prime-time programming until his ouster in 1981 (which the book does not cover). Under his guidance, and as a result of competitive pressures he encouraged, the TV networks realigned programming from action dramas to comedy; accelerated reliance on such scheduling and programming techniques as "stunting," "cross-pollenation," and "spin-offs"; and brought on-air promotion of shows to a frenzied pitch. And yet, as *Up the Tube* shows, these activities were not the creation of Fred Silverman, nor was their increased use unexpected as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s. Silverman responded in a predictable manner to trends already under way. He did place his personal stamp—which included a monomaniacal, research-based thoroughness—on the schedules of the networks he headed, but he did not fundamentally change television. Rather, he took the programming strategies that had been developing over two decades and brought them toward their logical extremes.

*Up the Tube* describes a program development process that fits hand-in-glove with a program scheduling process. This is not to say that all the shows Silverman and his competitors developed with Hollywood production firms in the 1970s conformed to the cookie-cutter, sex-and-violence mold that TV's detractors emphasize. The 1970s saw "M*A*S*H," "The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Roots," and "Playing for Time," even as they were overwhelmed by the likes of "Charlie's Angels," "Supertrain," "Speak Up, America," and "The Love Boat." And, as Bedell's numerous examples about the inception of programs attest, no routine mechanisms explain the genesis of *all* programs. Still, Bedell's tale confirms that in television the timing of even an unusual product is rather predictable. The typical does get produced in cyclical variation by a Hollywood-based production system that has become

skilled at ascertaining the needs of the networks for products and filling them. In fact, as scheduling strategies increasingly dictate programming needs, network program executives increasingly have been coming up with series ideas of their own and turning to reliable producers to carry them out.

Bedell offers many examples that back up these statements, without ever referring to the influence of geography or community on the television business. *Media Made in California* takes quite a different perspective. Jeremy Tunstall and David Walker point out that "into the consciousness of the modern consumer of mass media have poured countless items of knowledge of California," and that "media California is always with us" (p. 7). Moreover, they add, the state's style is stamped on the media process as well as product:

> *"California" is as much an organizing principle in the modern media as geographical description. For example, California is the place where both performers and forms cross over, spin off, and conjoin....*
>
> *Legitimate and bastard, spin-offs make the Hollywood schedules roll. Only in California can a hot movie beget a television series; a hit record—"Ode to Billy Joe"—beget a movie. "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" begat "Rhoda" begat "Lou Grant," an everyday tale of the life of Los Angeles journalists working for a paper with distinct resemblance to THE LOS ANGELES TIMES.*
>
> *Such Texan products as "Urban Cowboy" (1980) and "Dallas" are unmistakably California products even if partly filmed on location . . .* (pp. 9–10).

### *How substantial are the media's links to California, and what is to be made of them?*

Tunstall, a British sociologist well known for his writing on mass media, and Walker, a British journalist, feel that the California connection is very substantial, and they believe that the significance of that connection is great. The problem with their book is that it rarely probes deeply enough to explore precisely the manner in which, and the extent to which, media material for the nation and the world is made from "the stuff" of the Golden State.

A major difficulty seems to be with the scope of the authors' subject. Tunstall and Walker imply two basic questions at the start of their work: (a) what kind of media life does California, the most populous of the United States, have? and (b) how does that media life influence the view of life that national media present to the country as a whole? These are powerfully interesting and important questions, but they are powerfully

large and difficult ones as well, and the 197 pages of this book serve only as an introduction to the issues involved.

One reason the length does not satisfy is that the authors are careful thinkers. They are aware of the complex geographical, social, political, economic, and industrial influences on California and its media, and on the media of the nation as a whole. They concoct no sweeping statements to encompass all the areas they are studying. Thus, for example, they reject Ben Stein's argument in *The View from Sunset Boulevard* (10) that television is a product merely of the Hollywood creative community's view of the world, a view that is unified, Jewish, ultra-liberal, and at variance with the values of most of America. Taking a middle ground between those who would see California as a vast melting pot of ideas from around the nation and those who would see California as wildly unique in its innovative forms, Tunstall and Walker argue that they "want to have it two ways and regard California in part unique, but also typical of the rest of the United States and, again in part, in the vanguard of developments elsewhere" (p. 11).

The complexity of such an argument in the face of so large a topic should be evident, and it cannot be said that Tunstall and Walker succeed in their goal. Their strategy is to divide the book in half, to use Chapters 2, 3, and 4 to explore California's uniqueness ("as presented in the content of the state's media and in the organization and culture of the Beverly Hills occupational community"—p. 11), and to use Chapters 5, 6, and 7 to argue the California media's typicality ("the concentration of ownership in the metropolitan press; the burgeoning of radio as a result of FM's new selling powers and the federal deregulation movement; the invisibility in the media of ethnic minorities"—p. 12). The individual chapters hold up as accurate, though very brief, sketches of their subjects, but it is difficult to fit them into the authors' initial argument in a truly satisfying way. For one thing, the reader must accept the authors' characterization of certain aspects of California media life as unique and other aspects as typical. No extended comparisons with other states or media communities are offered.

Just as important, Tunstall and Walker do not try to fit the two sections of their book together closely. Chapters titled "Television and Radio" and "Press"—about statewide media—could almost be in a separate book from chapters called "Beverly Hills: Occupational Community" and "Beverly Hills: Power and Work." A chapter titled "The Two Californias," about the poor, rich, ethnic, and criminal elements of the state, does show some continuity with writing that comes before it. "Posing for Office," the penultimate chapter, which traces the historic and contemporary influence of "Hollywood" on state and national office-holding and campaigning, probably does the best job of showing

relationships between the two sections of the book. Still, an air of directionlessness obtains throughout the material. Perhaps because the authors are not elucidating a narrowly defined thesis, their writing often seems to hop around the Golden State with the only purpose being to collect and sketch any and all media-related activities.

When *Media Made in California* is approached not as a unified work but as a series of brief sketches about media life—both "entertainment" and "news" in California—the book's usefulness, particularly its suggestiveness for further research, becomes more apparent. Tunstall and Walker studied their surroundings keenly during a year's sojourn in California, and they have strewn their book with interesting insights and factual nuggets about the state's media history, sociology, and politics. Their discussion of the "Beverly Hills occupational community," for example, presents important material regarding the development of television programming that Sally Bedell, whose perspective comes mostly from New York boardrooms, fails to consider. Talent agents and agencies, guilds and guild politics, family ties, neighborhood friendships, country club memberships—these and other aspects of life often have substantial influence on the development, implementation, and look of programs. They are aspects of life that spring from a traditional concentration of a large number of creative personnel in a particular area; Tunstall and Walker make a noteworthy contribution in underscoring their importance. Unfortunately, though, the authors' attempts to pinpoint the influence of the "Beverly Hills occupational community" in mass media material—they see it, for example, in the use of Los Angeles streets in various police shows, in the familiarity to viewers of California deserts in pictures about Arabia, in the use of the Los Angeles highway patrol as the focus of the TV show "CHiPs"—are extremely superficial and tend to deflate the importance of that community.

***Tunstall and Walker's recognition of the significance of the "Beverly Hills occupational community" need not contradict the evolving organizational perspective on the production of mass media culture.***

The television and film industries, like most mass media industries, often intermix two approaches to administering production. One approach, which Stinchcombe (11) called a "bureaucratic" administration of production, involves the conceptualization and development of material in-house by regular members of the producing organization. The second, which Stinchcombe called a "craft" style of administration, involves management's hiring of creative personnel to carry out specific tasks. They are relied upon to do the job according to their best

knowledge, and they leave when they are finished. Television network programming activity (which *Up the Tube* describes) tends toward a bureaucratic administrative style, while work in Hollywood more closely resembles the "craft" description; actors, directors, composers, even producers, are often hired by networks or production firms to complete short-run tasks and then let go. One might suspect that "craft" hiring practices in an area with a high concentration of similarly skilled workers would lead, much more than the bureaucratic system, to a shared sense of community and locality. Further, one would expect that the shared sense of community and locality would be reflected in the materials those workers produced—within the constraints and opportunities set by the organizations that guide craft hiring practices and that contain strong elements of the bureaucratic administration of production.

Intermittently, serious writers such as Powdermaker, Stein, and Tunstall and Walker have insisted that the place called Hollywood (or Beverly Hills or California) influences the films, TV shows, and records that help define the world for hundreds of millions around the world. It remains for further research, on much more narrowly defined issues than those raised by Walker and Tunstall or Bedell, to trace the nature and depth of those influences and to tie them into the industrial/organizational perspective that seems to have so much explanatory power.

### *REFERENCES*

1. Anthony, Gene. *Summer of Love*. Milbrae, Cal.: Celestial Arts, 1980.
2. Brown, Les. *Television: The Business Behind the Box*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971.
3. Cook, Bruce. *The Beat Generation*. New York: Scribner, 1971.
4. Cowley, Malcolm. *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s*. New York: Viking, 1934.
5. Gillette, Charlie. *The Sound of the City: The Rise of Rock 'n Roll*. New York: Dell, 1972.
6. Hentoff, Nat and Nat Shapiro. *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*. New York: Dover, 1955.
7. Hoffman, Frederick. *The '20s: American Writing in the Postwar Decade* (2d ed.). New York: The Free Press, 1962.
8. Lewis, David Levering. *When Harlem Was In Vogue*. New York: Knopf, 1980.
9. Powdermaker, Hortense. *Hollywood: The Dream Factory*. New York: Little, Brown, 1951.
10. Stein, Ben. *The View From Sunset Boulevard*. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
11. Stinchcombe, Arthur. "Bureaucratic and Craft Administration of Production: A Comparative Study." *Administrative Science Quarterly* 4, September 1959, pp. 168–187.