Book Review: *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television*

Lotz, Amanda (2017) *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television*, Ann Arbor: Maize Books (Michigan Publishing), p. 108.

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In her recent work, *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television,* Amanda D. Lotz examines and defines frameworks, terminologies and methodological tools to understand and analyse the changing American business model of television, and its evolution from broadcast channels with scheduled content and advertiser-driven revenues to non-linear distribution systems with unlimited-access content and subscriber-based revenues. She denominates these 'non-linear distribution systems' as 'portals,' which she defines as 'the crucial intermediary services that collect, curate and distribute television programming via Internet distribution.'(Lotz 2017, 8). She gives HBO Now, Netflix and CBS All Access as examples of 'portals'—or the new form of channels—whose most important function, she believes, is that of 'curation' or 'of curating a library of content based on the identity, vision, and strategy that drive its business model.' (Lotz 2017, 8) This stands in contrast with more traditional channels whose main function, she maintains, is that of 'scheduling,' and selecting which content to broadcast at a given time to attract significant audiences.

Portals could be of interest not only to TV scholars but also to those researching cultural industries, as it attempts to bridge the gap between models and frameworks in order to conceptualize new media phenomena. Lotz notably analyses portals in terms of Bernard Miège's three models of media production ('the publishing model, the flow model, and the written press model') in his work *The Capitalization of Cultural Production*, and how they might apply to understanding the contemporary media landscape (Lotz 2017, 17/Miège 1989). She underlines that the 'flow model' fits traditional TV industry logics and practices, in which channels are essentially schedulers and continuous distributors of content. The 'flow model' as well as the 'written press model' (which concerns newspapers and magazines) involve advertiser revenue-based media and thus these models are not particularly applicable to the study of portals. However, Lotz believes that the 'publishing model' could be used to conceptualize portals to some extent. The publishing model is generally applied to examining the recording industry, the cinema, and book publishing because it involves the creation of cultural works that are distributed directly to consumers who purchase those that interest them. However, this model is an imperfect fit for the study of a portal like Netflix, as Netflix subscribers do not purchase individual shows, but subscribe to a bundle or library of

programmes. Yet Netflix does deploy a 'mass customization strategy' or 'conglomerated niche' strategy that targets different individual customer tastes at the same time by using 'filter bubbles' to seduce subscribers with customized content (Lotz 2017, 26).

Lotz also underlines various other economic and creative aspects of the portal business model and TV industry logics, from changes in revenue streams to changes in production. She notably analyses an important change in the way programmes are created. In the past, TV shows were often developed and produced by studios that were independent of the channels that broadcast them, and these studios would then control all the licensing, rebroadcast and resale rights. Portals often directly produce and control their own content, and thus become 'studio portals'. Lotz notes that this can have important implications for the sort of programmes produced. Executives at traditional channels select content in an attempt to garner mass audiences at specific times dictated by schedules, especially the sort of viewers that advertisers desire, notably those who are white and affluent. As portals attempt to reach 'niche' audiences, they can be freer in the sort of shows they can produce. Lotz also notes that the programmes that can be of value to a portal—in terms of cultural significance or resonance with viewers—do not need to be the most watched, and that the endless possibility for watching and re-watching on portals may allow for a programme to grow in value and viewers over time, whereas more traditional channels are still under pressure to produce immediate numbers for first-time viewing.

Lotz does not end the book with a conclusion, so much as a question, wondering if the book publishing industry may provide an 'alternative paradigm' for re-visioning the logics and the functioning of the evolving TV industry (Lotz 2017, 80). She writes,

> The book industry offers a long history of its medium's adaptation to shifting distribution forms (hardback, paperback, e-book) through corresponding adjustments in business models (subscription and circulating libraries, direct sale) and the establishment of sectors with distinct logics (mass market, award contender, specialized topics, academic) that aid thinking about the business of television in different ways required in a era in which television is free from linear schedules (Lotz 2017, 80-81).

Thus, as TV programmes are shifting from being programmed as scheduled events to being consumed more like books (at the leisure of their consumers), internet TV channels (or portals) are evolving to function more like libraries, as curators of great repositories of cultural products to be consulted at whim.

Lotz calls *Portals* a 'treatise', as she maintains it is an 'illegitimate offspring' of a longer book, *The Cable Revolution*, and it is written in a more free-form style (Lotz 2017, 1).[1] She further notes that as a 'treatise', her work exists outside of traditional academic publishing

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[1] This was likely the working title of her book, *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All* (2018), which was published after *Portals*.

forms and crosses disciplines (business, cultural industries, media studies). Moreover, she expresses the hope that it will reach both academic and non-academic audiences alike. At 108 pages, *Portals* is shorter than a traditional full research book. In order to be able to publish information quickly about a rapidly evolving industry, Lotz published *Portals* under Maize Books, an arm of the University of Michigan Press, which deals with new and more experimental formats of academic writing. It was not blind peer-reviewed, although it was subject to review by an editorial board and received peer feedback, and Lotz remarks in the introduction that she takes full responsibility for the content.

Yet Lotz's expertise as a professor at the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and as an author of many books on the subject of TV studies, clearly shines in this treatise: *Portals* is informative and accessible. It would be a useful read for both beginning and experienced researchers as it clearly outlines frameworks, methodologies, and actors involved in 'new media' or internet-based media. However, as a 'treatise,' in some ways, it is more hypothetical and theoretical than concrete, and it lacks some of the examples, statistics and citations that might be published in a longer, more traditional study. It seems intended as jumping off point, a way to start a conversation and be part of the continuing and shifting dialog around new industries and practices, and as such it succeeds.[2]

References

Lotz, Amanda D. (2017) *Portals: A Treatise on Internet-Distributed Television*, Ann Arbor: Maize Books (Michigan Publishing).

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Biography

Dr. Anne Sweet is head of the Scientific Committee of the academic journal *Traits-d'Union*. She holds a Master of Arts from Columbia University and a Doctorate from the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3. Her doctoral research examined the cultural and commercial phenomenon of Girl Power that promoted media products featuring empowered women to young media consumers. She has also published articles on TV addiction. She teaches American Civilization, English, TV and Film Studies, and is a lecturer at L'École Nationale des Ponts et Chaussées and L'Institut de Gestion Sociale (Groupe IGS).

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[2] This review was of the print version of the book, but an open-access online version is available at http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9699689 (accessed 31 August 2018).