



TV on Strike: Why Hollywood Went to War over the Internet. By Cynthia Littleton. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012. 288 pp. ISBN: 9780815610083.

Early in the first chapter of *TV on Strike*, author Cynthia Littleton recounts an interaction between high-ranking ABC Television executives Vince Roberts and Anne Sweeney. Roberts congratulates Sweeney on a job well done with the program *Desperate Housewives*, as he cues up a DVD and plays the opening scene of the *Housewives* finale. Roberts says, “Fifteen minutes after the show ended last night, I downloaded this from BitTorrent.com.” In 2006, Sweeney would describe this scene to Littleton as “the moment when we knew we had to do something, but didn’t have many options. We started talking about piracy in a new way, which was piracy as a true competitor for our viewers” (Sweeney, quoted in Littleton, 2012, pp. 10–11).

Littleton, a deputy editor at *Variety*, traces these concerns about the Internet and the future of television in her book *TV on Strike: Why Hollywood Went to War Over the Internet*. The book gives an account of the Writers Guild of America’s (WGA) strike in 2007–2008, detailing the decisions that led to the strike, its events, and its aftermath. Having served as a reporter and editor for industry publications, Littleton is well positioned to provide a history of the strike and its consequences.

In 1988, the Writers Guild folded in contract negotiations concerning VCR rental tape revenue. On November 5, 2007, determined not to let this happen again, the union led a work-stoppage that lasted until February 12, 2008. Littleton’s account of the strike is based on her own coverage of the event and relies on quotes from newspaper reports, interviews, primary source documents, and on-the-ground reporting sources. She follows picket lines and boardroom tussles in a chronological and historical account of the strike. Like any good televised program, *TV on Strike* has a cast of engaging characters, from hard-charging labour leader David Young to incendiary labour-relations negotiator for Hollywood’s major studios Nick Counter. Littleton’s account follows key players through the strike and describes in detail the power plays involved: “On a personal level Counter was incensed by the rabble-rousing and the tactics by Patric Verrone and David Young. He believed they were spoiling for a fight, for their own aggrandizement, and he was not about to be cowed by them” (pp. 118–119). These colorful descriptions provide an insight into the motivations on each side.

Littleton’s text is a breezy and accessible read. Full of footnotes and research, she delivers an insider’s take on what were often secretive negotiations. Littleton provides detailed explanations of the significance of the strike in a style intelligible to the non-specialist. The book excels in setting a backdrop for the 2007–2008 strike, explaining how the failures of the 1980s, especially in terms of videotape royalties, led to the WGA’s position on Internet residuals. This issue was the key sticking point of the recent strike, and Littleton’s reporting provides context for the positions of those involved.

Although the text successfully chronicles the strike as told through its power players, it fails to provide a convincing argument for the Internet as the impetus for the war, as per its subtitle, *Why Hollywood Went to War over the Internet*. The book is de-

scriptive of the strike and its major players, but lacks analysis as to why the Internet was responsible for the strike. In other words, the text asserts that the Internet is killing television without supporting or interrogating this point of view. Beyond brief mentions of BitTorrent, Netflix, and Hulu, the book barely examines economic conditions affecting network television, new business models that incorporate streaming video, or audience changes in the face of media convergence. Much scholarship (Deller, 2011; Harrington, Highfield, & Bruns, 2012) has addressed the increasingly social nature of television, with viewers adding a “second screen” to their television viewing—for instance, by following conversations on Twitter. Littleton’s book, without interrogating the arguments made by television networks about lost revenues from online content and without providing persuasive evidence that the Internet is harming the business of traditional television, misses an opportunity to connect labour concerns to these technological innovations.

Littleton does briefly discuss these issues in relation to the introduction of supplemental videos connected to network programs. She notes that NBC produced a large number of “webisodes” featuring characters from *The Office*, *Heroes*, and *Crossing Jordan*, among other programs. The network argued that these two- to four-minute shorts constituted “promotional material” rather than original programming (p. 59). This kind of content represents one network strategy that demonstrates the potential for combining digital technology with traditional television; it also raises questions about labour. Examples like this one merit whole chapters, not paragraphs, as in this book.

More could have also been made of the economic realities of changing markets. Early in the first chapter, Littleton notes that online video provides no revenue opportunities for television producers, stating that “the profits generated by paid downloads and advertising-supported web streaming are minute compared to the money networks make from traditional commercials” (p. 2), without providing actual numbers or evidence beyond anecdotal statements.

Littleton’s final chapter, “The Bloodletting,” summarizes the end of the WGA strike. She argues that while the WGA had a valid reason for the strike, it continued for longer than necessary and at great cost; she notes that the revenue from new media residuals and jurisdictional gains have not yet offset the costs of the work stoppage (p. 231). *TV on Strike* provides a comprehensive history of the WGA strike, but it may not provide enough analysis for media scholars interested in how and why television went to war over the Internet.

References

- Deller, R. (2011). Twittering on: Audience research and participation using Twitter. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 8(1), 216–245.
- Harrington, S., Highfield, T., & Bruns, A. (2012). More than a backchannel: Twitter and television. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 10(1), 13–17.

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