The broad architecture of approaches in media, communication and cultural studies to our objects of study is by now well established. We use political economy to study industry structure, corporate power, and state action; we study production cultures, organizations and processes (e.g. conditions of labor, production regimes); texts and content (e.g. genre, style, social representation) and audiences/readers/users (e.g. active audiences, user agency, consumption patterns). What is hotly contested, however, in the discipline field is how to account for change in media industries. This is especially the case in debates around the rates and effects of digitally-influenced change. Analytical clarity and authoritative new knowledge in the discipline field useful to scholarship, industry and policy is inhibited by extremes of enthusiastic optimism or determined skepticism in the apprehension of the rates, processes and effects of the take-up of new media technologies.

This presentation looks at the capacity of our discipline field to account for the velocity and quality of digitally-influenced change. I want to make a case for a “middle range” approach that steers between unbridled optimism and determined skepticism about the potential of such change. I use a major site of such change – online screen distribution – as a case study, considering how to approach the evidence for, and the significance of, change in industry structure and the main

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