

**Darren Wershler, Lori Emerson, Jussi Parikka.** *The Lab Book: Situated Practices in Media Studies*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022. x + 333 pp. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5179-0218-6.



**Reviewed by** Dana Freiburger (Independent Scholar)

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**Commissioned by** Penelope K. Hardy (University of Wisconsin-La Crosse)

*The Lab Book: Situated Practices in Media Studies* represents five years of research by its three authors in formulating not just “a method and a model for thinking about labs in general” but also a practical new scheme for understanding the ubiquitous “media and humanities lab, especially in the context of the university environment” (p. 240). Their scheme, which the authors speak of as a heuristic and name “the extended lab model,” is based on using six recurring analytical categories that emerged during the book’s preparation—space, apparatus, infrastructure, people, imaginaries, and techniques—and that proved critical in revealing the prevalent hybrid nature of the labs the authors examined through historical case studies and interviews with present-day lab denizens (p. 2). What results is a clear and well-documented discussion in which the authors employ their heuristic to examine a variety of labs, ranging from Edison’s historic Menlo Park lab to the contemporary MIT Media Lab, describing how labs come into existence, make new knowledge, innovate, survive, fail, and

otherwise navigate their varying circumstances. *The Lab Book* helps us find our way around these pervasive media labs in an accessible and resourceful new way.

The book’s introduction opens with the assertion that “labs are everywhere, and we can’t stop talking about them,” which establishes an engaging tone for its broad exploration of these spaces. As their first move, the authors explain why they sidestep trying to precisely define what a lab is, given that “the metaphor of the lab has permeated contemporary culture to the degree that it can apply to just about anything” (p. 1). That a lab could be “anything” provokes another claim that labs have always been hybrid owing to their plural motivations and cross-disciplinary activities, thus identifying the need for a supple, yet all-embracing, way to interrogate a lab, especially for labs situated in the arts and humanities. Here the authors turn to the historical French-language lab at Middlebury College, Vermont, circa 1928, as a case study from which they distinguish six “aspects” they then reconfigure into their proposed

extended lab model with its six analytical categories (p. 23). Having successfully enacted their model for this one lab, the book's main chapters continue this process, with each one looking at other labs in more detail, one category at a time. Their emphatic analytical tone reflects the authors' critical shift from asking "What are we talking about?" when it comes to labs to "How are we going to talk about it?" (pp. 24-25, emphasis added).

This decision to favor the "how" about labs not only grants each chapter the analytical freedom to speak for itself based on its category (space, apparatus, infrastructure, people, imaginaries, or techniques) but also reinforces the authors' stated aim that the book provides more than a mere survey or inventory of labs focused simply on the "what." This stance lets the authors draw productively on a wide historiography depending on the needs of each chapter; for example, they cite Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991) and Christopher Alexander's *A Pattern Language* (1977) while discussing "lab space" in chapter 1. The thirty-plus pages of bibliography further signal the deep research behind the book. Although each chapter's approach might sound similar at this point, something reinforced by the figure of their extended lab model (figure 7 on p. 24), which renders categories of space, apparatus, infrastructure, people, imaginaries, and techniques similar in size and imbricature, this is an elusive neatness at odds with the authors' warning that "real-world lab assemblages are messy, complex, and contingent" (p. 24). Indeed, if the authors leave the reader with one enduring impression from their book, it is that through a set of six tidy-yet-entangled analytical categories a lab's veiled, untidy nature will be exposed.

I envision readership of *The Lab Book* falling into multiple groups. The book should be requisite reading for anyone who might be thinking about setting up a new lab; indeed, in pondering such a venture they might take inspiration from the book's rich descriptions about so many types of

labs and their imaginaries. Current lab denizens might extract new ideas and modes of operation germane to their established labs. For both situations, the book serves as a guide and reference. In an academic setting, the book's historiographic strength and citations would make it suitable for an undergraduate science and technology studies course, where the dynamic relationship can be probed between the author's analytical categories around how labs produce knowledge, who is included or excluded in that activity, and how media labs align (or not) with the stated missions of today's educational institutions. Beyond having students read about labs in their various aspects, projects involving student visits to campus or other local labs to then write reports that build on the above questions suggest new lab techniques (as per chapter 6), or otherwise preparing a critical assessment of a lab would enable students to experience labs as real places of knowledge production. In this context, the book performs more like a roadmap in helping to disclose the inner workings of labs.

While the book reflects well on the agility of its three authors to jointly tackle writing about labs, I was not without questions at various points in how the overall book is approached. Although the book's six main chapters are fairly even in length at around thirty-three pages, the number of figures allotted to each one varies considerably from fifteen images in chapter 1 on space to just one image each in chapters 2 and 4 on apparatus and people, respectively. Given that labs appear fond of equitably celebrating their spaces as well as their apparatus and people, was the motive to give a single image each in these chapters to downplay any notions of equipment envy and human celebrity? Also, I noticed only half of the main chapters offer a conclusion, leaving me wondering if the reason the people, imaginaries, and techniques chapters lack conclusions is because they do not sustain enough of an analytical edge to support one? Also, I was pleased that the writers confess at the end of their book that it should have

had more geographical diversity given “that most of our examples of the university environment come from North American and different parts of Europe” (p. 240). I agree, as I kept wanting more about labs in the Global South as well as Asia. Hopefully *The Lab Book*’s adjunct online space will allow for this additional material (<https://manifold.umn.edu/projects/the-lab-book>, see pp. 2-3 for more details).

In closing, *The Lab Book* proved a rewarding read. Its trio of authors speak with a unified voice as they make a compelling case for the merit of their proposed heuristic, the extended lab model, as the means for interrogating labs of all kinds. Given how labs suffuse our present-day world, it is timely for them to show how new paths are being forged in the humanities when it comes to media labs and particularly lab discourses. Even with this book-length treatment concerning labs, the authors make clear their open-ended ambitions in the book’s introduction: “We offer *The Lab Book* and the extended laboratory model as a platform for further investigations and as a catalyst for continuing research that demands both more specific historical takes and perspectives that differ from our own” (p. 35).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-sci-med-tech>

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