

Television Labor: Historical Trajectories and Contemporary Concerns Global Contexts

Agents of R.E.L.O.C.A.T.I.O.N.: Location Professionals and Spatialized Television Labor

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In this response, I am engaging with television's new "spatial economy," an environment where the rise in tax incentive programs has dramatically expanded the geography of television production both domestically and internationally. Specifically, I want to identify location professionals as a below-the-line labor category crucial to facilitating this expansion, and also as a group of laborers disproportionately affected by the labor conditions of the new spatial economy.

I have chosen to focus on location professionals for two reasons. The first is that the work of location professionals—the scouts who find locations and the managers who negotiate/facilitate their use—is crucial to expanding production beyond traditional media capitals and into nascent media capitals. As location manager Michael Meehan notes, the existence of "books" filled with potential locations used to be "the calling card of Los Angeles," with the city mapped out by decades of local production. By comparison, when the introduction of an incentive system dramatically increased production in states like New Mexico or Louisiana, such a book didn't exist, as there had not been enough local production to facilitate this type of spatial resource.

The absence of this resource creates demand for location professionals—both formal and informal—that can help nascent media capitals offer a similar "plug-and-play" service to productions. In the case of Louisiana, local tourism professionals were among those who were brought into the film business in the early days of the incentive system, traveling to take photos for producers calling from outside of the state searching for a particular type of location. This role is also played by local film commissions, whose employees are responsible for either providing or at least archiving location information as part of their pitch/service to producers looking to film in a particular location. These workers may not be location professionals in the traditional sense, but their job descriptions are distinctly tied to local geography, and thus take a natural place in the spatial economy.

Ultimately, these media capitals require the development of full-time location professionals, particularly in order to sustain television production (which is both valued as a way to provide stable and ongoing production experience for a newly-established crew base and more challenging based on the larger number of locations required compared to a film or commercial). In order to help facilitate the increasing production being drawn to the United Kingdom, for example, the Production Guild of Great Britain introduced an extensive training program specifically for location managers, who "pave the way for well-managed and

smooth productions and play a key role in ensuring the UK film and TV production sector maintains its competitive edge and excellent delivery.”

Meanwhile, the system also creates its own location professionals through on-set experience: Rebecca Puck Stair, a location professional based out of Albuquerque, New Mexico, followed the incentive system into film and television production, and then gravitated toward locations and has since worked on a range of projects. Comparing her connection to geography to that of a taxi driver, Stair claims “I pretty much know the entire state, and if you show me a picture I will tell you where it is, anywhere in that state.” This knowledge helped her manage the specific challenge of doubling Albuquerque for Austin in ABC’s *Killer Women*, a procedural that required a large number of locations per episode, and also helps give productions in Albuquerque the same locational shorthand as the Los Angeles “books” offer that city and other more-established media capitals.

However, the second reason I’m interested in the work of location professionals is because this strong relationship between their knowledge and the local dimensions of nascent media capitals makes their position within the new spatial economy particularly precarious. Incentive structures are inherently volatile, with North Carolina’s incentive system currently in jeopardy as a new government cuts back on film and TV-related spending. This affects all below-the-line crew based in that location, as they may be required to move to other states in search of sustainable work should North Carolina no longer be able to draw the same scale of film and television production, but it affects location professionals distinctly given that their central skills require incredible time to generate in a new location: while a camera operator’s skills may require slight adjustment depending on region, a location professional’s skills are tied to their knowledge of a specific city, state, or region, limiting their ability to chase the incentives to another area.

Accordingly, while the new spatial economy creates an intense demand—and, as outlined here, need—for location professionals, it also creates an environment where those workers are particularly vulnerable to the ups and downs of incentive-dependent production environments, requiring workers like Stair to be proactive in preparing for a time when their knowledge is no longer as valuable to the industry should those incentives disappear.